



The
BOY SCOUTS
CAMPAIGN
for
PREPAREDNESS
LIEUT. HOWARD PAYSON

CHS-46D



Bob, kneeling down, managed to get a firm grip of the other's coat at the back of the neck.
(Page 22) (*The Boy Scouts' Campaign for Preparedness*)

THE BOY SCOUTS'

Campaign for Preparedness

By LIEUT. HOWARD PAYSON

AUTHOR OF

"The Boy Scouts of the Eagle Patrol," "The Boy Scouts on the Range," "The Boy Scouts' Mountain Camp," "The Boy Scouts for Uncle Sam," "The Boy Scouts at the Panama Canal," "The Boy Scouts and the Army Airship," "The Boy Scouts with the Allies in France," "The Boy Scouts on Belgian Battlefields," "The Boy Scouts Under Fire in Mexico," "The Boy Scouts at the Panama-Pacific Exposition," "The Boy Scouts Under Sealed Orders," etc.



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The Boy Scouts' Campaign For Preparedness.

CHAPTER I.

THE MUSHROOM MUNITION PLANT.

"After all, Rob, New Jersey is a pretty decent sort of a place, judging from what we've seen of it during our little trip down here."

"Whatever got into your head to the contrary, Tubby?"

"Oh! I don't know. You see there have always been so many jokes floating around in the papers about Jersey being *out* of the United States, that I guess I came to look on it as one big mosquito swamp or bog."

"That sort of talk makes me laugh, Tubby. They would have hard work beating our own Long Island brand of insect pests. Why, Jersey, in many ways, is one of the most important

States in the Union. Her manufactures are climbing up nearer the top every year now."

"That sounds like great stuff, Rob, and you a Long Island boy, too. It's just like your generous self. But what do you suppose all those buildings can be we see over yonder, surrounded by a high fence? Is that a lunatic asylum, or a penitentiary?"

The young fellow who answered to the name of Rob, and who was really Rob Blake, a shining light in the Hampton Troop of Boy Scouts, turned and looked at his companion with an amused smile.

Indeed, that comrade was really worth more than passing notice, and many people had been attracted toward him with considerable friendliness, for not only was Tubby Hopkins exceedingly stout, but his freckled and rosy face usually boasted a bland smile that was childlike and winning.

Both lads were dressed in the regulation khaki suits such as distinguish scouts wherever one may run across them this wide world over. In the most inconspicuous manner possible they also

modestly had certain badges and medals fastened to their coats.

Now, any one who happened to be acquainted with the customs of the great National organization would easily understand that these boys, and Rob in particular, had at previous times been enabled to perform some signal service to humanity. This might be in the way of saving life at considerable personal risk. That their valor had been acknowledged by the wise leaders at Scout Headquarters was amply proven by the bestowal of these highly prized medals of honor.

In answer to 'Tubby's natural question the leader of the Eagle Patrol, for Rob filled that office, as well as acting many times as assistant scoutmaster to the Hampton Troop, hastened to satisfy his curiosity.

"I'm a little surprised at you not guessing the truth, 'Tubby,'" he said, pretending to show it in his looks, "especially when every day the papers are teeming with accounts of new places opening up, on account of the great rush of foreign orders pouring into this country."

"Oh! I'm on now, Rob! It must be a brand

new factory for the making of war munitions!" cried the fat scout excitedly. "Now, what d'ye thing of that, with me wanting to set eyes on one of those bee-hives of industry? But why the stockade all around that lot of stone and brick and cement buildings, Rob, which made me think it was a penitentiary, or lunatic asylum? Who wants to rob a munition works, tell me?"

"Tubby, wake up!" said the other, soberly. "Haven't you been reading the papers lately, when there is account after account of mysterious attempts to destroy the places that are so busy on war orders? One day it's a munition plant or powder works that is blown up in a strange way, and the next thing we read is that some factory where they are working night and day on shoes, or overcoats, or blankets for the Allies has been fired, no one ever seems to know how or by whom."

"Sympathizers with the German cause, Rob, wouldn't you say, must be responsible for this reign of terror that's passing over the country in certain places?"

"I haven't the least doubt but that is partly the

truth," came the quick reply, "but then lots of these explosions must also be laid to accident. They've taken on a big bunch of green hands; and besides, we're more apt to be careless of human life in America than in some of the older countries of Europe. It only needs a spark to set things jumping where there's loose powder lying around. That spark can even come from a steel nail in the heel of a boot, you know."

Tubby gazed fixedly at the collection of stout looking buildings not so far away, and down upon which they were able to look from the slight elevation upon which they had halted.

"I wish I had a chance to see what the inside of those munition works is like," he mused, half to himself. "They must be mighty interesting places, don't you reckon, Rob?"

"To be sure, Tubby, and I would be delighted to have a chance to peek into one of them myself. I want to tell you a little secret about this one in particular, but before I do so you must promise me on your honor or a scout never to pass it along to any one else. Mr. Wainwright told me in con-

fidence a couple of weeks ago when he was visiting at our house."

Tubby immediately held up one of his chubby hands with a solemn expression on his face.

"I give you my promise, Rob, and you can depend on it the secret will go no further. Mr. Wainwright is connected with the Secret Service at Washington, and he ought to know a heap of what's going on in these exciting times."

"He does, and I guess he wouldn't have told me what he did only for the great service some of us Hampton scouts were enabled to do the Government not many moons ago, when we recovered those precious plates that had been carried off by a certain man believed to have become suddenly irresponsible."*

"Go on, Rob, what is there queer about these munition works?" urged Tubby.

"Nothing about the plant itself," Rob informed him. "The buildings are pretty much like dozens of others that have sprung up like mushrooms almost in a night in different parts of the East. But here's what counts, Tubby," and he glanced

* See "The Boy Scouts Under Sealed Orders."

around in a cautious manner before finishing that caused Tubby to hold his breath with mingled feelings of interest and awe, "instead of working wholly on orders for the Allies over across the sea, this particular plant is engaged on *rush work for Uncle Sam!*"

"Bully for that!" cried the delighted Tubby. "I'm tickled nearly to death just to know that we've actually waked up at last, and taken a sudden notion to get our coasts ready to stand off a hostile fleet if anything *should* happen no matter from *what* direction."

"The Administration at Washington," continued Rob impressively, "has finally realized that the United States, while trying to be neutral in this terrible World War, has made enemies on every hand. Germany and Austria hate us because our business men have been supplying their foes with all sorts of munitions, as well as food, clothing and auto trucks which, under existing international laws, they have a perfect right to do. The Allies think we've shirked a solemn duty as the leading republic in the world, and stood by, content to make enormous profits while they are

doing our fighting for us to save the world from being military ridden. Japan, too, is feeling sore at us because of what the people out in California did to their emigrants some years back—not treating them on a par with white people. A near-panic has come to the leaders in Government circles on finding that in case of sudden hostilities the supply of ammunition for the big coast defense guns is woefully short.”

“Gingersnaps and popguns! Rob, why, they would take the Panama Canal away from us in a jiffy, and have us by the throat. Oh! why didn’t the Washington folks wake up a year and more ago, and be doing all these things on the sly, even while making out that there wasn’t a ghost of a chance of our getting mixed up in this awful thing?”

“Yes, that’s what nobody can find out, Tubby,” the other assured him. “But from what I heard it seems that they’ve got a big attack of nerves down there now, and preparation for any possibility is on everybody’s tongue.”

“Huh!” grunted Tubby with a touch of disdain in his whole manner, “if those big men in Wash-

ington had only been *scouts* when they were young, they never would have made such a terrible mistake. 'Be Prepared' is the motto that we stand by. It governs our every-day life, and so a true scout isn't often taken off his guard. Yes, they'd have looked ahead a long ways, and made ready for emergencies. Then there would have been plenty of big guns, ammunition, officers trained to command, and also a million soldiers in private life, ready to spring to arms at a bugle call."

"Good for you, Tubby!" chuckled the scout leader, with a pleased smile. "Those sentiments are my own. I believe in *preparedness* just as the canny Swiss have made it their National motto. It is a republic, but every boy is trained to be a soldier, though allowed to carry on his private business as he grows older. Still, at a word, the whole little Nation is astir, and every man, young and old, has had a certain amount of military training that enables him to serve with credit."

"Sure thing, Rob. Here, even if we did raise an army of six million men nearly every one of

them would be greenhorns, and require many months of training before fit to stand fire."

"We'll be lucky if we get through this rumpus without being dragged in," continued Rob, looking at the munition plant in the near distance with reflective, far-seeing eyes. "But anyhow it's bound to arouse the United States to the terrible state of unpreparedness that has been allowed to hang over the country. We used to rely on our isolation for security, but that time has gone by now."

"You bet it has!" Tubby went on to say energetically. "Those Germans have busted that defense by means of their big under-sea boats that can cruise three thousand miles without replenishing their stores."

"Don't forget that their Zeppelins have been vastly improved since some lucky ones among us saw them sailing overhead when we were across on the other side last year.* They claim to be able to cross the Atlantic now, and carry an enormous number of terrible bombs with them. We

* See "The Boy Scouts On Belgian Battlefields," also "The Boy Scouts with the Allies in France."

are no longer free from the danger of invasion, and there are dozens of places along our unprotected coasts which I haven't any doubt are all charted and mapped out for just that purpose, if you could only see into the secrets of a number of countries like Japan and Germany."

"But, thank goodness, Rob," said Tubby eagerly, "the country has waked up at last to its great danger. Preparedness is in the air these days. All sorts of necessary things are being done secretly, I reckon, like this making of munitions for our battleships and coast batteries, that are supposed to be for the Allies. Given six months more of peace and Uncle Sam ought to be ready for nearly anything that might happen."

"Then let's hope there will be six months," said Rob, gravely; "but a number of people are of the opinion we're sitting on a powder magazine that only needs a spark to bring about an explosion that will shake the whole country."

"That sounds scary, Rob, I must say," observed Tubby Hopkins, blankly. "What d'ye suppose would happen if some enemy did manage to invade our Eastern coast?"

"We would be caught napping," the other admitted, positively. "Our whole regular army, even if it could be hurried to meet an attack, wouldn't be equal to one-quarter of the trained soldiers that could be landed on our shores, armed with the big guns that smashed their way through Belgium, and before which no fortress has yet been able to stand. Why, we would be at the feet of a conqueror in no time, with New York paying billions of indemnity to save it from being destroyed."

"And, Rob, tell me why all these munition plants are in the East when it seems that many of the same ought to be located in the Mississippi valley, where they could never be reached and taken by an enemy?"

"There, Tubby, you've asked a question that is bothering a good many wise thinking patriots. It should be done right away. It's a National crime to allow all this munition work to be done here close to the coast. The Government ought to set up a big plant of its own somewhere near the center of the country. Mark my words, that is what will come to pass before long. It is a

step along the line of preparedness that is taking hold of the whole United States. A country with a conscience like we've got isn't going to knock a chip off the shoulder of some other nation in order to start a row; and the more we are prepared the less danger of our ever having a war, or playing the part of a big bully."

"Sure thing, Bob!" Tubby declared. "Our record with Cuba and Mexico proves that. We want no territory, and our one hope is to live at peace with all nations, big and small, attending to our own business, and to be ready to help the suffering when they send out a call for assistance."

"When you asked me to come down here with you, Tubby, after your father had commissioned you to do that important errand for him while the school was being kept shut on account of putting in a new heating plant this winter, I made up my mind I'd see what the *outside* of a munition plant looked like, because I knew we would be in the neighborhood of this big one. Perhaps I even hugged a little hope to my heart that something might come up to let us have a look-in, though I suppose that would be too great luck to expect."

"Listen! Rob, I thought I heard some one shouting for help just then! Oh! I wonder if there's going to be one of those explosions we've been reading about!"

CHAPTER II.

A FATEFUL MEETING.

Tubby's announcement gave them both a decided thrill. Having lately been talking about the numerous explosions that had recently shocked the whole country, sometimes attended with loss of life, the possibility of witnessing such a dreadful scene aroused them to the utmost.

"There, I heard it, too, Tubby!" said Rob, presently, as his strained ears caught a feeble shout from a point some little distance away. "But it seemed to come from over yonder where those woods lie. Let's listen again and make sure."

Presently both of them caught the cry, as a slant of the cold wind carried it once more toward them. As near as they could make out, some one was certainly calling for help.

Being scouts, both boys immediately thought of but one thing, and that was to speed to assist the unknown person in trouble.

"Rob, mebbe some poor fellow has cut his foot with an ax, and is bleeding to death over there in the patch of woods!" suggested Tubby, as though that might be the most plausible explanation that occurred to him on the spur of the moment.

"Come along, we must get there as quick as we can!" the patrol leader exclaimed, and suiting the action to the words, he immediately hastened off on a run.

It was not an easy matter for Tubby to keep at the heels of such a fine sprinter as Rob Blake, for he weighed nearly half as much again as his chum. But then Tubby played baseball, and had been known once upon a time to get to second base on a heavy hit he had made. Besides, he could shut his teeth together and show considerable vim when he chose.

Accordingly, he managed, somehow, to keep pretty close to the running Rob, who had vaulted a low fence that Tubby had to tumble over any-which-way, and was now hurrying through the outskirts of the woods.

As they advanced the cries became more audible. At the same time it seemed as if the party

calling for help must be getting somewhat exhausted, for there was something of a plaintive appeal in his repeated shouts.

All at once, Bob, breaking from among the trees, sighted a big pond that lay beyond, with a struggling figure splashing about in a hole in its center. The man must have broken in while attempting to cross, for the ice was treacherous on account of a recent thaw.

The unfortunate individual had apparently broken his way partly toward the nearest shore, but becoming chilled and weakened by his efforts, had now started trying to summon help.

Rob was quite at home in a case of this kind, and knew exactly what to do in order to rescue any one in danger of being drowned. He saw a fence close by and immediately started to tear some planks off, paying no attention to rights of property.

"Get two more, Tubby, and follow me!" was what he shouted to his panting chum, who had, by this time, arrived on the spot, filled with excitement at seeing what lay before them.

The boards were laid on the ice, each one be-

yond the others. In this way the two scouts quickly had a safe passage all the way out to where the unknown man was clinging to the edge of the rotten ice, and begging them to hurry up, as he felt that he must let go soon.

Bob, kneeling down, managed to get a firm grip of the other's coat at the back of the neck, and at the same time called out:

"When I'll be able to yank you out, try the best you can to help by getting one leg up on this board!"

It was done almost like magic, and the dripping young fellow, who looked like a countryman or a mechanic, was brought sprawling upon the temporary mattress.

"Now crawl after me till we get to the shore!" continued the boy who knew how. "Get along with you, Tubby. You're making the ice bend in spite of all these planks."

They soon reached the bank, and the first thing the rescued one did was to insist on shaking hands with both the scouts.

"I reckon now you done saved my life for me, boys!" he said earnestly, though his teeth were

rattling together like Spanish castanets, and he could barely talk.

"Never mind that now," Rob told him with a touch of the tone of command with which he was accustomed to give his orders when in charge of the troop. "You're in a bad way, soaked to the skin like that, and with such a raw wind blowing. We've got to have a fire somehow, and dry you out before we separate. Luckily we're not pressed for time, and can stand by you, my friend."

"Rob, how about making a fire in that little old deserted cabin we passed when chasing through the patch of woods?" demanded Tubby, as though struck with a good idea.

"A fine thing, Tubby," commented the other. "So let's hurry that way. Keep flapping your arms back and forth this way all you can, Mister. You must be doing something to keep your blood circulating, you understand."

Rob showed the other how to do as he said, and as they hurried along, the fellow, who had been rescued from a perilous situation by the two scouts, kept slapping both arms violently back and forth until his fingers must have tingled;

but Rob would not let him have a moment's rest.

Tubby was a splendid hand at fire-making; indeed, anything that had a connection with getting meals ready always claimed first attention from the stout boy. His practised eye discovered plenty of fine stuff as he went along, calculated to serve as kindling. As soon as they reached the old cabin he quickly started a crackling blaze on the deserted hearth that had doubtless for many years served to get primitive meals for those who once lived there.

Rob meanwhile pounded the stranger, and urged him to continue his motions. Every possible means for warming the body must be employed if he wished to ward off an attack of pneumonia, which is the worst danger following such exposure as he had so recently gone through with.

By degrees, as the fire picked up and fairly roared, he was induced to take off portions of his garments, which were hung up to dry. Here again the experience of the two scouts came in handily, for they knew how to best accomplish the desired result.

It was some little time before the other seemed able to conquer that quivering of his jaws that caused his teeth to chatter. Rob could have helped matters considerably had they been in camp, for then he would have made a pot of coffee and put some of the hot drink inside the drenched fellow so as to induce artificial heat. As it was, he had to resort to rubbing.

When a whole hour had passed they had made such good progress that the young fellow, who had been rescued from the big pond, was feeling very comfortable, and before a great while he would be able to start forth once more, really little the worse for his recent experience.

He had been watching the faces of the two scouts from time to time as though speculating in his mind as to what manner of boys they were. Something about the manly appearance of Rob, as well as the confiding face of Tubby, must have insensibly impressed the young fellow, for finally he made a remark that aroused their interest.

“Say, now, I’m head over ears in debt to you boys for what you’ve done,” was what he said, “and I’m mighty much tempted to tell ye how it

comes I'm a-hangin' around this here section of country when it's full o' danger for the likes o' me."

"Wish you would," said Tubby, without the least hesitation. "What's your name in the first place, Mister? You see, we like to keep a list of the people we've pulled out of tight places, and so we ought to know what you're called at home."

"Home!" repeated the other, almost mournfully. "Hain't got no sech place; only wisht I did hev, and then mebbe old Mr. Beare wouldn't treat me so mean, and keep Susie from me like he does."

"Susie!" snapped Tubby. "That sounds like a girl's name?"

"So 'tis," explained the other, "and the puttiest leetle gal ye ever set eyes on, if she is my own wife. I'll tell ye how it stands. Ye done me a good turn, and mebbe ye might gimme a little advice on how I kin convince Mr. Beare he oughtn't keep Susie away from me no longer."

"Pitch in," sang out Tubby, throwing more wood on the fire, and settling down to listen to the story, which he already guessed must turn

out to be an interesting one, because there was a Susie involved; "but first of all what's your name?"

"Josh Whittlesby, though when I was a boy some of the fellers used to call me Samson 'cause I could lick my weight in wildcats any time. I'm the most unlucky man in the hull State of New Jersey. Seems like I never get a job as a machinist when the company busts up, and I'm thrown out again. I want to work the wust kind, but somethin' happens every time. Dad Beare he just up and says Susie couldn't have me, but we run away and got spliced. Then along comes her dad and takes her back home 'cause I didn't have any job. 'When ye get settled, and c'n show me that ye're earnin' fifteen a week steady,' he sez, 'mebbe I'll let her go back to ye. But if ye come a-hangin' around my house with nary a job to back ye, I'll have ye locked up in jail.' "

Josh paused, partly to get his breath, and also to give a deep sigh that seemed to almost well up from his heavy boots, now partly dry again. Tubby felt sorry.

"That was a tough deal for you, Josh," he went on to say, "but then sooner or later you're bound to land a paying job at your trade, and can then claim Susie. Tell me, does she live around here?"

"Jest what she does," replied the other, with a queer look on his face. "I stood it as long as I could, and then when the last job went back on me afore I'd worked a full week, I made up my mind I'd take the chances and try to see my girl Susie, 'case I'm dying to say one word to her. Then I heard a machine-shop or somethin' like that had been started down this way, and I kept a-hopin' I might get a job near where she lived with her awful dad."

"You must mean the munition plant that's sprung up so fast," remarked Rob, at the same time wondering whether it would be safe to have such an unlucky chap at work in a place where he might do incalculable damage if his old hard luck continued to pursue him.

He saw a strange look of intelligence swiftly pass over the dark face of Josh, who, from his manner of talk, may at one time have been a

country boy who had drifted to the city and taken up the trade of machinist.

"I've larned about that since then," he told them, "though at first I didn't know a munition plant meant a place where they made all sorts of ammunition, and shells for the big guns and sech things. I reckon now that I had orter to tell ye 'bout the strange thing I heard two fellers a-talkin' about."

He looked at the open door of the cabin as though in fear lest some unseen party might be hovering beyond, ready to catch what he wanted to say. Tubby guessed that this was worrying Josh.

"Wait till I step outside and make sure the coast is clear, Josh," he hastened to say, for Tubby liked to be theatrical when the chance arose, and to his mind things should always be done according to the book.

So he went out of doors, looked carefully all around, even stepping into a little patch of bushes, so that when he returned, which he did a minute later, he was able to say there was not a sign of any interloper within earshot of the old cabin.

"I'm glad ye done that, Tubby," said Josh, who had heard the fat scout's name mentioned so often by Rob that it fell naturally from his lips, "'case they're a desprit lot I reckons what are aimin' to blow up that munition plant!"

CHAPTER III.

ALARMING NEWS.

"What's that you say, Josh?" exclaimed Rob, starting up suddenly.

"Gee whiz! it makes a cold chill go through me!" muttered Tubby, staring at the other as though he could hardly believe his ears.

Josh grinned a little as though being in the lime-light might be a new experience with him, which he quite enjoyed.

"That's what they was talkin' 'bout—I give ye my word for it, boys," he went on to say seriously. "I had so many troubles o' my own, what with losin' my last job and not seein' Susie for so long, that at fust I made up my mind not to bother, 'cause it wasn't any of *my* business, ye see. Then it got to ranklin' in my head, and I begun to imagine seein' some poor innocents bein' blowed up in the air by them schemers. When I started to cross that pond back yonder I was figgerin' on how I'd best go 'bout informin' the

authorities what was a-brewin'. Guess I got to thinkin' so hard I never noticed how rotten the ice was, and all of a sudden—kerplunk!—in I went."

"Tell us more about what you heard, Josh!" urged the patrol leader.

"Well, it's this way," continued the other in his slow way. Evidently Josh was one of those fellows who can seldom be hurried. "When I was hangin' around an' a-tryin' to hatch up some excuse for askin' Dad Beare to let me see Susie, I larned that he had some sorter interest in this here new works that had gone up since I was down in this part o' Jersey. I knew then he could git me a job if only he wanted to; but he said before I had to make my own way, and he wasn't a-goin' to lift a finger to help me out. So there wasn't no use seein' him and lickin' his boots."

"That was the right kind of spirit, Josh," said Rob. "It may be that your father-in-law only wants you to show that you've got it in you to make your own way. Stick to it! You'll succeed! Now about these men you overheard talking—who were they?—and tell us what they said."

"I never did see either o' the men afore, to tell ye the truth, and I wouldn't have knowed what their names was, only one called the other Cooney, an' I reckon he must have been boss, 'cause the short yellow-haired man kept sayin' that ever so often."

"Go on," urged Rob, when the other paused again.

"It all happened this morning, understand," said Josh gravely. "I was poundin' my head an' wonderin' how on earth I'd better try and get word to Susie that I was a-dyin' to see her, when I heard somebody comin' through the woods where I'd been spendin' the night by a fire. I thought first off it was the old man hisself, 'cause one o' the voices had the same kind o' a grumble and growl like his'n, so I jest natchally crawled into some brush and laid low.

"They kim along. I seed there was a pair of 'em, and that it wasn't Dad Beare, arter all. When I heard 'em a-talkin' 'bout bustin' things sky-high an' all sich, I had to lie still and listen for all I was wuth. They stopped near by and had a kind o' argument like. Seems the Boss he

wanted the job done when the plant was idle at night-time, and Cooney, who 'peared to be a regular terror, sez as how them that worked thar knowed the risks they took, and that war was always cruel and bloody anyway, so if a lot of them chanced to get hurt it was their fault for takin' up with such work."

Rob and Tubby exchanged glances. Tubby's face was no longer rosy with color. Indeed, he looked rather white under the eyes, as though deeply impressed with the gravity of the situation that had so suddenly confronted himself and comrade.

"Can you give us any sort of description of the two scoundrels who could so deliberately plot such a terrible crime?" asked Rob steadily, bent on finding out all he could in the start so that he could shape his plans.

"Oh! I ain't no great hand to make pictures with words," complained Josh. "Cooney looked like he might be a bad one. He had a heavy face and a black mustache, with white teeth back of the same. When he laughed he used to fetch up the sound like it come from his boots. The Boss

was a slick chap, tall and good-lookin'. He could sing off the good talk like he might be educated right smart. But even at that I reckoned he was in the pay o' somebody higher up. Once I heard him say he'd get more money when a certain party heard from the other side. Say, I wa'n't clear whether he was meanin' the Atlantic or the Pacific. I reckoned the plot was backed up by money put up by some foreigners."

"The chances are you guessed right, Josh," Rob told him. "There are many foreign spies at large in our country to-day, ready to do anything desperate so as to cripple Uncle Sam in his new campaign for preparedness. That munition plant has guards to watch it day and night. But some of these schemers have been known to get work inside such buildings in order to render the machinery useless, or else bring about an explosion—always after they've been able to get their own precious bodies away in safety, for none of them will risk being blown up. They are too great cowards for that sort of thing."

"The two men didn't suspect you of spying on them, did they, Josh?" asked Tubby, showing an

unexpected talent for pursuing the cross-questioning when Rob desisted for a brief period. The scout master nodded his approval.

"Well, now, I soon caught on to it that they was a hard crowd," replied the other, with a whimsical smile on his homely but honest face, "and you c'n bet your bottom dollar I kept mighty sly ahidin' thar and listenin' to everything that was sed. I waited till they was far along the path afore I crawled out o' the bushes, and went in another direction."

"But it must have struck you as a terrible thing to do," observed Tubby. "I don't see how you could make up your mind that it wasn't any of your business, while others' lives were in danger."

"Say, I never meant that I looked at it jest that way," pleaded Josh, showing signs of feeling hurt. "What I did mean was this. Ye know I'd larned that Dad Beare had a keetle interest in this new plant. Somehow I kinder got the foolish idee into my head that if it was burned down, and he done lost his money mebbe he'd feel more like lettin' me take Susie away."

"Josh, I'm surprised to hear you say anything so silly," said Tubby severely. "You've never been educated along those lines, let me tell you. If you had, you would know what a jolly chance you had to make Dad Beare respect you, and feel himself placed under heavy obligations by the son-in-law he had scorned. I repeat, you would have cooked your goose for all time."

"How's that, Tubby? I want ye to tell me right smart what I could a done to make that old terror of a farmer respect with a no-account as Josh Whittleby?" exclaimed the other, desperately, laying a pleading and trembling hand on the scout's arm.

"Listen then, and I'll explain," said the accommodating Tubby. "Suppose you went to Mr. Beare and told him what you had heard about the plot to injure the munition plant. He might think you were yarning at first. Then it could be easily proved, if they chose to make the test. Then, Josh, he would feel that you had showed yourself competent to engineer a big deal, and that he was under obligations to you. Why, say, he might even think of getting you a job there as

part payment for the debt he owed you, Josh. You were silly to never once think of what a great chance you had to win out."

"Jest like my bull-headedness," complained the young mechanic. "I can't seem to do the right thing ever. Guess that would a-been the best plan for me, Tubby. Mebbe it ain't too late yet to try. When I fell into that pond, and ye heard my yells for help, it must a-been my lucky day, 'cause things seem to be gettin' brighter right along. If I could on'y see Susie once more I'd be satisfied to work like a dog, jest like old Jacob did for the gal's daddy, in the old days, ye 'member, for seven years."

"Wait," said Rob, whose face was filled with concern, "you must do nothing rashly now, Josh. A single false move might queer the whole game, and such clever men as these schemers, backed by Japanese or German gold as they may be, would have spies scattered about everywhere, you understand. You've put yourself in our hands, Josh, and you must consent to do whatever we ask of you. Your reward will be all you could wish. It will give you Susie, with perhaps a fine

chance to fill a position in those new and bustling works over there."

Josh looked particularly well pleased. He smiled broadly and there was a happy glow in his eyes.

"I'm satisfied to hand the case over to sech bright fellers as ye two boys," he hastened to say. "Jest tell me what I'm to do, and I'll work my head off a-tryin' to git there. It's all for Susie I'm doin' it, and say, I'd go through fire an' water to serve *her*. She promised to always have faith in me, and I want to make good the worst way."

"All right, then, you shall," Rob promised him in that quiet but convincing way of his that always carried weight. "From this time on don't make any move without being in touch with us. Let me run the campaign and we'll see to it that whatever reward comes along is slanted in your direction, Josh. It was you who first got wind of this terrible conspiracy against preparedness, and you deserve full credit for whatever is done to nip it in the bud."

"What's the programme, Rob?" asked Tubby, with kindling eyes.

"It seems up to us, Tubby," the other told him, impressively, "to crush this base scheme before it gets fairly started. We must save this plant, for Uncle Sam's new plan for preparedness would get a bad jolt if these bee-hive buildings were to be blown up, or burned to the ground. So, Tubby, we must get busy right away!"

CHAPTER IV.

ON THE JERSEY ROAD.

Half an hour after Rob had spoken his mind about their entering the lists against the secret conspirators who were, for some unknown cause, threatening the munition rush orders of the Government with disaster, the two boys, accompanied by Josh, might have been seen moving along the road.

A good many fellows, upon learning all that Rob had picked up within the last two hours, would have deemed it their bounden duty to hasten to interview the head man of the big munition plant. Once in his presence they would have disclosed facts that he might have believed, or else treated with scorn as the wildest and most improbable sort of talk, conceived by a couple of boys seeking notoriety, and aided and abetted by a poor wandering mechanic out of work who wanted a job.

Rob was wiser than that. He looked further

into the future, and could easily detect where an injudicious move might queer the whole business.

"You see," he was saying to Tubby, for the fat chum had actually asked him why their best move would not be to look up the manager of the bustling works and "make his hair fairly curl with the punch there was in their story."

"You see," Bob replied reflectively, "the main thing in a case like this isn't wholly to balk the plotters. It is to *bag* them, and so prevent a recurrence of the miserable scheming."

"Well now, I guess that's about right, Rob," admitted Tubby, who could always see distinctly when some one else held the telescope for him, "if they were knocked out in the first round it would end the fight. There would be no second-wind business about it, which is often worse than the first. What are your plans, if I may ask such an important question, Rob?"

"So far as I've been able to make any," replied the other, seriously enough, "I'll tell you what seems to be our best move. We'll get a little further away from the plant, and then find some quiet place to stop at for a short time. There

I'll leave you and Josh while I take a train and go to either Newark or New Brunswick or perhaps Trenton, whichever seems the easiest."

"I'm following you, Rob," said Tubby solemnly, as the other paused a few seconds, "and I suppose while there you'll do some wiring to Washington."

"First of all to Hampton," Rob told him with a twinkle in his eye, at hearing of which Tubby chuckled.

"Oh! Rob, are you meaning to let some of the other fellows in on this racket?" he demanded, eagerly.

"It struck me," the patrol leader replied, "that I'd be mighty well pleased if I had Merritt Crawford, Andy Bowles, and perhaps one or two other fellows who can be relied on—like Sim Jeffords and Walter Lonsdale—along to give us a helping hand. We don't know what we may be up against before we're done with this affair. A little bunch of scouts who know each others' ways, and can be depended on to work like beavers, might be a big help to the officers at Washington."

"Then you mean to get in communication with Mr. Alexander Wainwright, who is connected with the Secret Service Bureau?" asked Tubby.

"I shall try to get him on the long distance 'phone," Rob explained further, "and have a hurry talk with him. Perhaps I had better do that first so as to arrange my other plans about calling on the boys *after* I've had his permission."

"If there were half a dozen of us scouts here," mused Tubby, "I'd feel that we could manage things better. 'In union there is strength.' Rob, if Walter can't come you might ask Merritt to try for Hiram Nelson, who could let his inventions drop for a short time and join our forces down here in Jersey. Then there are Joe Digby and Martin Green, both members of the Eagle Patrol in good standing."

"Leave all that to me, Tubby, and make sure I'll do the best I can. Now while we're tramping along this road, keeping an eye out for some tavern or other house where we can put up for a spell, I want to ask Josh here a few more leading questions that have occurred to me."

At hearing this, Josh, who had relapsed into

a gloomy condition again as hope gradually lost some of its new grip, brightened up once more.

"I sure am willin' to tell ye everything I knows," he announced. "Since I met up with sech bright young chaps as you two seem to be I somehow feel that things is a-goin' to take a turn for the better in my own case. I'm a-tryin' to see the silver linin' o' the black cloud which you was a-sayin' allers could be found if ye looked hard enough."

"That's the right spirit, Josh," Tubby assured him buoyantly. "Heaven always is ready to help those who help themselves. You've just got to put your shoulder to the wheel every time, and do your part of the work. Say, Rob, wasn't that the motto of our old Puritan ancestors in New England when they used to go to church with a gun over their shoulders, and keep repeating 'Trust in the Lord, *but* keep your powder dry'?"

"I guess that was their wise policy, Tubby," chuckled the leader. "In effect, the same is true of the Boy Scout of to-day. He is taught to depend on himself and always to do his level best, not only to extricate himself out of difficulties but

to lend a hand to some one more unfortunate."

Rob then turned to Josh Whittlesby, who after having had his clothes thoroughly dried, was apparently feeling no ill effect from his recent unpleasant experience when he broke through the treacherous ice of the big pond.

"Let your mind go back again, Josh, please," Rob started to observe, "to the time you lay there listening to what those two conspirators were saying. Try to bring up all you heard, and tell me if there seemed to be any particular time set for pulling off the game, as you told me they called it."

The young mechanic thereupon screwed up his forehead after the manner of one who was industriously urging his "thinking machines," as Tubby called his brain, to do its full duty. Presently he looked up again and there was a ghost of a smile on his homely but honest face that pleased Rob.

"You've thought of something then, eh, Josh?" he asked.

"Why, I certain sure did hear the Boss say that accordin' to his calculations things ought to

be all fixed for to-morrow night," replied Josh, with a confident manner that told he was positive of his ground.

"That settles it then," announced Rob, evidently well satisfied with the progress he was making. "Nothing is to be done to-night, for their plans are not matured. I'm glad to know that. It gives me the chance I want to carry out my own little scheme. If we can have another day ahead of us it's going to be a strange thing if all of us united can't lay a trap that will trip these schemers up by the heels, and help Uncle Sam out of the bad hole he's falling into."

"That's the ticket!" gurgled Tubby, acting as though well pleased. "Once more it is up to the Eagles to show what they can do along the lines of scoutcraft. Rob, the fellows who have such a fine record in their past history can be depended on to toe the scratch again in this emergency. Hampton to the fore, and every scout primed to do his duty."

Tubby stood "at attention," with his right hand raised as though taking the oath of allegiance afresh. Even Rob, with his mind riveted on the

new and perplexing problems by which he had been so suddenly confronted, felt compelled to smile at the comical appearance of the stout chum when assuming such dignity and gravity, for it was as a rule very difficult for Tubby to look anything but humorous.

It was now well on in the afternoon, but at least an hour or more of sunlight remained before the winter day would be spent. The road was not in the best condition possible for either walking or driving, but for all that they met many teams and cars, and were overtaken by others. Since that magic town had started up almost in a night, surrounding the extensive works that employed some thousands of workers, the days were filled with the sound of the hammer, and the roads in that vicinity were occupied all day long with teams fetching lumber and building material, while the adjacent railroad kept an engine puffing constantly as it shunted loaded cars and empties back and forth, shuttle-style, on sidings.

Perhaps they might not find it an easy task to run across a house that could accommodate them

over a couple of nights. With such a great influx of people there would be a woeful lack of room for boarders; but then, at a further distance away from the plant, their chances might become better.

At any rate, Rob was not worrying about this. He felt convinced that all would turn out well. Some farmer's wife might be induced to give them a room and meals, tempted by a chance to turn an honest dollar.

If the question had been put up to Tubby he might have flipped his hand indifferently, and very likely replied that only let Rob get a chance to talk with any farmer's spouse and the thing would be done. Tubby had the utmost faith in Rob's ability to win friends; he had seen the scout leader meet an angry man and by the magic of his engaging manner speedily cause him to shake hands cordially, and ever afterwards take a great interest in scout doings.

Rob was still asking questions, and Josh had to cudgel that sluggish brain of his in order to give intelligent replies. After he had "pumped the other dry," doubtless Rob would be in a con-

dition to figure things out to his own satisfaction.

Once or twice Rob stopped the driver of a lumber wagon and asked about the chances of finding some sort of inn further along the road. It was in reply to these inquiries he heard about a road tavern that stood a quarter of a mile further on.

"Fust off ye'll see a blacksmith shop where they mends aut'm'biles nowadays," the driver told them, pointing with his whip-back over the road he had just traversed. "Then jest at the place where the crossroads happens ye'll run acrost a low house with a sign a-swingin' in front. Thet's the Black Hoss Inn, stranger; and I guess as how they might 'commodate ye thar. Ye see it's too fur from the works fur the employees to want to stay thar. Get-up, ye lazy-bones, and pull like ye was earnin' yer oats!"

Rob was quite satisfied. If they could secure a couple of rooms, or even one with two beds in it, they ought to be able to endure things for a short time. While not close to the munition plant, at the same time it would be possible for them to get over there when they wanted, with or without a vehicle.

"I'm not sorry to know we've only got a quarter of a mile more to trudge along this miserable old road," grunted Tubby. "The walking is certainly tough. Lucky I thought to put on my heavy-soled shoes when we started. I had an idea it would be pretty much all bog. I've learned a few things since striking this part of the country."

Tubby often talked to himself. When it promised to do no particular harm, Rob was in the habit of permitting this, for it seemed to ease the mind of the stout boy considerably. Tubby called it his favorite method of "blowing off steam," and it served to amuse him while possibly also accomplishing that purpose.

Josh happened to glance around him from time to time. Possibly, having once been a country boy, Josh could not rid himself of the habit of wanting to see who was overtaking them on the road; or it may be he had not entirely overcome the suspicion that they might be run down by some speeding automobile.

Rob heard him give a sudden exclamation that indicated excitement.

"What is it, Josh?" he asked, instantly, and was thrilled when the mechanic was heard to say:

"I tell you the feller in that car comin' after us is the Boss that did most of the talkin' when I overheard 'em plottin' an' plannin'."

CHAPTER V.

A PLAY OF WITS.

"Listen, both of you," Rob hastened to say just as soon as Josh had made this important announcement, "be on your guard, and pay no more attention to the man than if he were an absolute stranger. Hear that, Tubby, and you, Josh?"

"I'm on, Rob!" replied the fat scout without the least hesitation.

"I understands what ye mean, sir," came from Josh, who evidently was so much impressed with the commanding ways of the scout leader that he felt willing to accord him all the respect due a gentleman.

"Leave it to me if he should happen to stop," further suggested Rob, though at the time he did not have the remotest idea the man would do this, as there appeared no reason for it.

He could hear the car coming now, and said nothing more, only turned his head in a most casual and natural way as he stepped further

out from the road so as to give the machine more room for passing.

Then he saw that the car was actually slowing up as though some sudden notion had struck the chauffeur to speak to them.

Only one man sat in the car, which Rob, with that one swift look had noticed was a brand new article, and something of a racer in the bargain. As the two boys and Josh stood at the side of the road the machine drew up directly alongside and the driver leaned toward them.

He was a smoothly shaven man with the keenest eyes Rob could ever remember seeing in a human head. Whether he might be a German or not the boy could not tell from his appearance; nor was he any better off after he had heard the man's voice, for it contained no foreign accent that he could detect.

"Excuse me, but you are strangers in this section of the country are you not?" was what he said, in a suave and polite tone that Tubby afterwards declared sounded "just like he was trying to spread molasses on bread."

"We happen to be just as you say, sir," re-

plied Rob, thinking it his best policy to be polite. "My friend here had some business down in this region, and I kept him company. This man is a mechanic looking for work, and we've promised to help him what little we can."

The man was coolly looking them all over while Rob was speaking. The scout leader noticed that his gaze rested longest of all on plain Josh, which was queer. He certainly could not be at all interested in a poor hard-luck mechanic seeking a billet so as to earn his daily bread.

Could it be possible, was the thought that flashed though Rob's active mind, that for some reason or other the man suspected Josh of having spied upon himself and companion at the time the seeker after work was hidden in the brush? There was no immediate way of finding an answer to this question, and so Rob had to content himself with letting it pass by.

"I only asked you this," pursued the other, softly, and with a faint smile on his face that Tubby inwardly likened to a sneer, "because we real estate men are a suspicious lot as a whole. I'm from New York myself. Here's my card,

young fellow. Values have jumped up sky-high since this wonderful plant was started here. Some men have built up little fortunes speculating in property. I've come on the ground rather late, but as I'm backed by big capital I expect to make some noise before long."

Rob wondered whether there might not be a touch of sarcasm in this last remark made by the "Boss." If what they knew about his plan of campaign were founded on facts he certainly did intend to make a "big noise" when the right time came; but it would be with buildings torn and rent under the force of a tremendous explosion as the valuable plant was destroyed by dynamite.

The card which he had handed so politely to Rob was a newly printed one bearing the name of Andrew Collins, and gave a New York address as well as the information that the man in question dealt in real estate. It was a neat looking card, but all the same the scout leader felt positive it had been printed especially for the purpose of allowing the man to wander at will among the Jersey hills and level tracts, without his real mission being suspected.

"Well, you needn't have any fear that we are rivals in your field, Mr. Collins," Rob told him, laughingly. "We are not interested in property at all, except our homes up in Hampton, Long Island, where three square meals a day can be looked for, week in and week out. We may stay down a day or two longer because we've become interested in the mushroom town that's sprung up here. It makes us think of some places we've read about out in the gold mines, when there's been a new strike made, and everybody runs there to get in on the ground floor."

The man in the racing car listened to what Rob said, and nodded his head as if he considered it none of his business how long the two scouts chose to remain in that section of country.

Rob watched him closely.

"Have you been through the new plant yet?" he asked, seemingly in a casual way.

"Why, no, we felt that we would like to see something of it, but were told they have very strict rules, and that strangers are not allowed inside the stockade. Is it really a munition plant, Mr. Collins, and are they engaged in making

ammunition and all that for the Allies across the ocean?"

"That is what every one believes," came the guarded reply, "though they try the best they can to keep it secret, and most of the workers never even get a chance to go anywhere but just where they are kept at a lathe all day long."

"We could see what looked like guards pacing back and forth in places, and they carried guns," Tubby ventured to remark just then.

"Which would only be natural, you see," the man in the car told him; "for making munitions is a dangerous business in more ways than one. You boys over here in this land of peace have no idea of what terrible things are going on across the Atlantic, with half the civilized world fighting dreadful battles, each side believing it must beat the other down to its knees before the end will come. No, you can thank your lucky stars that you live in America, though at any day your country may wake up to find that it, too, has been dragged into the maelstrom of war."

Rob gave him a smile as he went on to say:

"We are certainly glad to be living in a land of



He watched the face of the man in the car closely
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peace just now, sir; but some time ago it fell to our lot to see considerable of the terrible work you have been mentioning. Circumstances took several of us across to the other side, and we were in Belgium and Northern France where the fighting was thickest, so that we happen to know something of what's been going on."

Rob had a purpose in saying this. He watched the face of the man in the car closely, thinking to catch some shade of feeling when in so many words he told of being hand-in-glove with the Allies when over in Europe. Whatever the man may have thought, he seemed able to conceal his sentiments in the matter.

"Well, you certainly surprise me, my young friend!" he exclaimed. "I imagine that it would be pretty hard to find another Boy Scout who had passed through such a remarkable experience. I might even say that few full-grown Americans, outside of an occasional newspaper correspondent, have had the good fortune to be able to make such a boast as you can."

It was on the tip of Tubby's tongue to up and declare that if he knew more about the famous

Eagle Patrol of Hampton Troop he would not consider it so strange, because under the leadership of Rob Blake they had passed through other experiences well worth mentioning. However, Tubby did not say what was in his mind. Possibly he remembered the caution Rob had given them, or else managed to catch a warning look which the leader just then cast in his direction. At any rate, he clicked his teeth together suddenly as though locking the door to speech.

Mr. Collins asked a few more questions, but Rob noticed that his interest lay more in connection with what their present plans might be than with regard to anything wonderful which they might have witnessed when on the battlefields of war-ridden Europe.

Then he said he must be going, and bade them good day.

"If either of you boys happen to be in New York at any time later on I'd be delighted to have you drop around at my offices in the Colonnade Building. I feel an interest in the scout movement," and waving a hand to them, with one last quick glance toward the listening but silent Josh,

he started his car, to go speeding down the rough icy road like a comet.

Tubby turned to his chief, with an anxious look on his round face.

"What do you think of him, Rob? Isn't he the smooth article, though? That tongue of his would butter parsnips, and make you think you had bread. But he had to own up we were some pumpkins when you told him about being over in Europe on the battle line. That's more than he could boast of, most likely."

"He's certainly got all the earmarks of a clever rascal," admitted Rob. "As we happen to know next to nothing at all about the munition plant he didn't pick up much useful information from our crowd, if that was his notion in stopping us."

"Do you think there could have been any other, Rob?" Tubby continued.

"I'm only wondering, that's all," came the reply, "if he could have seen Josh near the place where he and that other man Cooney held their little confab, and has something of a suspicion that their talk might have been overheard."

"Gingersnaps and popguns! what makes you

think that, Rob?" gasped the other, plainly disturbed by the idea.

"I'm only speculating, that's all," Rob told him. "The probability is there's nothing in it at all, but a scout can't take chances. I'll have to be pretty careful when I go off to send that telegram or night message to the boys up home, and have my little talk over the wire with Mr. Wainwright in Washington, that's all. You see, it struck me he kept looking slyly at Josh every once in so often, as if trying to remember where he'd seen him before. I hope it's all right, and that he'll not go to any bother about keeping tabs on us."

"Whew! supposing he should get some confederate to spot *you*, Rob, and try to discover just where you went, and what your business was over the wire—that would be a warm proposition for you to handle! But if Mr. Collins comes poking around he'll get his fingers nipped in a trap, I bet. Rob, do you suppose that's his real name?"

"Not on your life," came the vigorous reply. "He's had that card printed so as to seem to have

some definite object in staying around this section, making all sorts of inquiries regarding the price of properties, and in that way finding chances to push himself in where he most wants to go."

"Do you think," Tubby next asked, "he's employed by some secret sympathizers with the German Government, or even by agents in the employ of the diplomatic representatives?"

"That's going beyond me just now," he was assured by Rob, laughingly. "Later on I may be qualified to give you an answer. So far we know nothing about the real object of these plotters. They may be hand-in-glove with foreign spies who want to cut off the big supplies of munitions that are hurting their side so much over in France, Russia and Belgium. Then again it may be they are enemies of Uncle Sam who know the truth, and want to keep him from reaching a degree of preparedness that will make him a power to be respected by the warring Nations."

"Anyhow," added Tubby with his customary philosophy, "we've run smack up against another

opportunity to show what scouts can do, and that ought to be enough for us to know to start with. I hope that when we strike that road-house it can accommodate us, and also that their cook knows how to set a half-way decent spread before the guests. I'm getting real hungry, though I hate to say it."

CHAPTER VI.

DRUMMING UP RECRUITS.

A short time afterwards Josh declared they were getting close to the crossroads where the blacksmith shop and the road-house stood. This pleased Tubby decidedly, and later on when they drew up at the long low building in front of which a swinging sign creaked in the breeze, and learned that they could be accommodated with lodgings, his face expanded in a wide grin.

“Say, let me tell you, Rob,” he whispered confidently to his chum after they had entered the taproom of the tavern, and gathered near the stove to warm themselves, “there’s a kind of a delicious smell beginning to ooze out of what I take to be the kitchen over yonder that gives me great expectations. Wouldn’t it be queer if we should actually run across a dandy cook away down in this benighted section of Jersey? Makes me think of that old poem about ‘many a flower born

to blush unseen, and waste its fragrance on the desert air.' "

Tubby's chief fault lay in the line of his voracious appetite which he was utterly unable to restrain at times. He loved to talk about eating, but felt still happier when gorging himself with all manner of good things.

Bob, on his part, was much more concerned as to what time a train would come along and whether he could the more easily go to Newark, New Brunswick or Trenton. He proceeded to ask questions of the landlord, stating that he had some business of importance he wished to transact.

When he came back to where the others were sitting Tubby looked at his face as if desirous of ascertaining what the result of his investigation had been.

"The landlord tells me supper will be ready in half an hour," was the first communication Rob made, and, as he anticipated, Tubby immediately started sniffing the fragrant atmosphere again, at the same time rubbing his stomach as if in congratulation.

"That's good news, Rob, and I kind of think I'll be able to hold off that long, though it's going to try me a heap. Have you picked up some information on your own hook?"

"I learned that I can walk over to the station on the road, and get a train that will take me to Trenton in something like an hour. But when I'll be able to get back again I can't say. If it were absolutely necessary I suppose I could charter a car to fetch me here again by midnight; but I can take chances of getting back in the morning at the latest."

"That leaves me in charge of the expedition doesn't it, till you come again?" observed Tubby, perhaps unconsciously puffing out his ample chest a little more than customary, as though he felt the importance of the situation.

"There will be nothing much to do except go to bed and sleep," he was told. "Don't do any wandering, and keep Josh close to you. Our business is to sit tight. When Mr. Wainwright has a chance to give me a tip I'll know what's next in order."

They sat there warming themselves and talk-

ing in low tones until the welcome sound of a big bell electrified Tubby into action. To see the way he hurried across in the direction of the dining-room of the tavern one would be reminded of a battle rush; but it could not be called the "Charge of the *Light* Brigade."

Tubby was soon busily engaged, and from the various nods he gave Rob it was evident that his opinion concerning the "jewel of a cook" was true. Tubby would be perfectly content to take up his lodgings for an indefinite stay under a hospitable roof that sheltered such a masterhand at concocting fine, appetizing dishes.

When they had finished the meal, and there were several other guests, it seemed, with whom the boys passed a few remarks as they catered to their wants, Rob told them he would have to be leaving if he meant to catch that train.

"It will take me all of ten minutes to get to the station from here, according to what the landlords says," he went on to explain. "The train is due in twenty more, so I'd better be off. Don't forget what I told you, Tubby. Josh stick tight to him until I return."

So he left them, and hurried away along the road, heading for the little town in the vicinity of which lay the munition plant. He had received full directions from the keeper of the roadside tavern, and accordingly, in due time, Rob pulled up at the station. Everything gave evidence of newness, showing that until lately there had in all probability been no such town on the map as Spencer.

The train was on time and soon Rob found himself speeding away, stopping at every small place on the road, and finally reaching Trenton, where he alighted. His business was entirely with the station, if as he hoped, he would find he could talk over the long-distance telephone from there. Accordingly he had no intention of going far, though believing it only the first duty of a carefully trained scout to keep his eyes about him, in order to make sure that he was not being watched.

Having satisfied himself that this did not seem to be the case, Rob first sought the station agent, and asked questions concerning his chances of getting a return train later on. He found that

there would not be one until morning; but that possibly he might be accommodated in the caboose of a freight that would come along an hour later, and which would take him to the new magic city about midnight.

This he concluded would be his best move, and having arranged with the agent to intercede with the conductor of the freight when it arrived, he felt that he could devote himself strictly to matters of business.

His first move was to write out a night-letter which he sent by wire to Merritt Crawford, one of his most particular chums, the corporal of the troop, and a fellow who could always be relied upon to stand by a comrade.

Rob had thought it all out beforehand. His object was to tell as little as possible of the true state of affairs, lest there happened a slip and a consequent failure of all their well-laid plans. It is such foresight that makes leaders successful.

He simply told Merritt something had happened of vast importance, and that if he could come down in the morning, and fetch three or four of the other Eagles along with him, it might

pay them to make the effort. Rob told where he and Tubby were to be found, and once again urged Merritt to try his best to come, assuring him he would never be sorry if he accepted the opportunity to see action again.

That night letter would be transmitted before morning, so that the recipient should have it in his hands immediately after breakfast. Giving him an hour to get the other fellows together and make a train for New York, Rob believed they ought to arrive by two or three in the afternoon, and this he considered would be perfectly satisfactory for his purposes.

The next act was to find out if he could get in communication with Mr. Wainwright down in Washington. Here, again, Rob knew exactly how to go about it to accomplish the desired result. In fact, the Secret Service gentleman had told him just what means to employ should he at any time wish to call him up when he would not be in his office at the Bureau.

Talking over the long-distance wire is always an expensive luxury, since a high tariff is charged for five minutes' conversation. Then there is

the chance of not hearing distinctly, besides other annoyances.

Rob could hardly be blamed therefore for feeling a little nervous and anxious when he asked to have connections with a certain number in the National Capital. To his great delight he even recognized Mr. Wainwright's voice when some one asked him who it was and what was wanted.

"It's Robe Blake of Hampton, sir," he replied, speaking plainly yet not raising his voice to any extent, though for that matter the booth was supposed to be sound proof. "I'm down in Trenton, New Jersey. With Tubby Hopkins I've been in the vicinity of that mushroom town you were telling me about the last time I saw you—Spencer."

As Rob paused he plainly heard Mr. Wainwright give an exclamation.

"Rob, have you run across anything up there that you think I should know about?" the Secret Service agent asked him anxiously. "I'm deeply interested in that new plant, and you know why. Tell me quickly, my boy!"

Again that well-regulated plan of preparedness

which Rob had mapped out came in good play, for he knew just what words to use in giving the desired information. He could easily imagine that it must have thrilled Mr. Wainwright through and through, for it had all the earmarks of a gigantic conspiracy against the United States' authorities, and especially directed so as to make the sudden plan of the Government to arm and equip against any possible invasion on the part of a hostile army prove to be a failure.

By the time Rob had told all that he had been enabled to pick up, the wide-awake man at the other end of the long wire had mastered the situation.

"You say you have information that this dastardly attempt to destroy the plant will not be put into operation until to-morrow night at the earliest, Rob?" he asked.

"Yes, sir, that is so," the boy told him.

"Then I will have my men on the ground as soon as they can be started from Headquarters. They will look for you at the place you have named, and this will enable you to know the one who first mentions my name to you. Trust him

to do all that is necessary. Rob, God bless you, for I verily believe it has been your great good fortune to scent out the most dangerous plot against the Government that has been unearthed for many a year. Good-bye, Rob. Ring off, and believe all will be well!"

Certainly Rob had good reason for feeling satisfied after this little talk with the man in whom he placed such implicit confidence. Secret Service officers would be sent up from Headquarters at once, to join forces with the scouts, and with those agents who were already on the ground, keeping watch over the plant in which the National Government had such vital interest.

True, these latter seemed to have no inkling concerning the scheme that had been hatched, but then that was not so very singular; only for the accidental meeting with Josh Whittlesby, and their winning his confidence through doing him a favor, really saving his life, he and Tubby might never have suspected anything of the kind either.

Rob now had only to sit around, chatting with the station agent, and waiting for that freight to

come along on which he hoped to be able to return to those who were doubtless sleeping contentedly in that little road-house near Spencer.

When the time came, Rob managed to get the consent of the freight conductor to allow him to become a passenger in the caboose. It was really against orders, but then Rob had enlisted the station man on his behalf, and his own appearance must have favorably impressed the conductor, who confessed that he himself had two boys wearing the khaki and that he really believed he had heard something or other about the Eagle Patrol connected with that Hampton Troop down on Long Island.

All of which shows what a good reputation will sometimes do for a fellow at times when he is least expecting favors.

The freight train was really carrying most of its cars to Spencer, which, when empty, would be loaded with munitions that were to be shipped, some abroad, and the rest to various places about the coast where such shot and shell were sadly needed by the big guns. It was partly on that account Rob had been told of the train, which

would make better time on the road than the ordinary local freight.

Once aboard he was given a chance to lie down and secure some sleep, with a promise that he would be aroused when Spencer was reached. Rob was not accustomed to riding on a swinging caboose hitched to the rear of a long freight train, but he could accommodate himself to nearly anything; and so he dozed and napped until one of the brakemen shook him and said they were whistling for the mushroom town near the immense munition plant.

CHAPTER VII.

THE SMOKE OF BUSTLING INDUSTRY.

Before leaving the roadside tavern that evening for Trenton, Rob had been wise enough to make all necessary arrangements with the landlord looking to his possible return at some time during the night.

It was in line with his campaign of preparedness to look ahead, and not leave anything more to chance than could possibly be helped. Hence he had taken his bearings carefully so that in the darkness of night it would not be difficult to find his way up to his room through the narrow passage of the inn's second story. There was no key to the door of the room the three of them occupied, and he had distinctly warned Tubby not to bother placing a chair against the same, as was customary with the fat scout.

Rob found the door at the side of the tavern open to his touch, and walking carefully so as not to needlessly arouse any one, he managed to make

his way upstairs. To his satisfaction he was able to quietly enter the room. Tubby was breathing heavily, at times giving a queer snort, and then softening the "exhaust" until one might almost fear that last noise had finished him, when he would begin all over again and work up to another climax.

Without disturbing either of the sleepers, Josh having a cot over at the further side of the large room, Rob undressed, and slipped into the vacant side of the double bed. The next thing Rob knew was when he heard a greatly surprised voice close by exclaiming:

"Well, of all things! I'd like to know how *you* ever climbed aboard, and me not get on to you with my lynx hearing?"

Tubby was sitting up in bed and staring at his chum in sheer amazement. As Josh had also been aroused he, too, raised his head to look and grin. Rob's eyes twinkled.

"Oh! I managed to get back along about two in the morning," said he indifferently, "though to do it I had to beg a ride in the caboose of a fast freight that was heading this way. I didn't have

more than a doze or two while on the road, so I tumbled into bed without bothering waking you up. I didn't feel much like talking."

"Then if you call that tumbling into bed," exclaimed Tubby, "I'd like to know what you'd do if you wanted to keep still. Why, a cat wouldn't have heard you, and that's a fact. I hope you slept well all the same, Rob?"

Tubby asked this last question a bit sheepishly, as one might who was troubled with a guilty conscience.

"Oh! I guess I got in a few hours of fairly decent sleep," the other replied, with a twinkle in his eye, "though I must have dreamed a whole lot, for I seemed to think myself on that long freight train again, with the engine snorting and wheezing to beat the band every time it started up a little rise."

Tubby turned somewhat red, for he knew Rob was giving him a little rub on account of the noise he made when sleeping and lying on his back; but being used to this sort of thing he presently laughed good-naturedly and proceeded to catechize the other.

"Then you got to Trenton all right, did you, Rob?"

"No trouble about that, Tubby."

"And sent that night letter to the boys up in Hampton?"

"They'll be in possession of the bare facts inside of a couple of hours at most."

"That's fine," Tubby said, looking greatly pleased. "I'll be happy to see some more of the Eagles loom up on the horizon. We can make good use of them. It'll sure be like old times, Rob, to put boys in khaki on guard. How about Mr. Wainwright?"

"I had a hurried little chat with him over the long-distance wire," Rob replied.

"I bet you he was some surprised at hearing from you that way?" suggested Tubby.

"Well, I imagine he was, for I heard him utter an exclamation that told me as much." Rob went on to say. "Of course, it was no time for lengthy explanations, and I had to dig right in so as to give him the gist of the affair in as few words as possible."

"Sure thing, Rob. Guess I know how words

are worth their weight in money when you're talking long-distance style. But you managed to say all you wanted, didn't you, in the five minutes?"

"All that was needed," the scout master assured him, "for Mr. Wainwright deals in just such thrilling episodes as the one we're up against right now, and so he could easily supply anything that was lacking in my account."

"And did he arrange with you to come up here, or else send some of his trusty minions along, who'd be capable of lending us a hand in rounding up these desperate rascals?"

Rob pretended not to notice the bombastic air with which Tubby said this, though inwardly he may have chuckled. It was not often that Tubby found himself in a position where he could really claim glory; and hence it seemed only fair that on this particular occasion he be allowed to puff a little, and enjoy himself, for, in Rob's estimation, he deserved it.

"He promised as much, Tubby, and they'll be along some time this morning. I told him where we were stopping, so they will look us up here.

We even arranged a word they were to give me by which I would know they were genuine."

"Listen to that now, will you? Rob, it certainly takes the cake the way you prepare for every eventuality—is that the word I want? Seems like nothing escapes your attention. I'm sorry for these poor, silly chaps who have been unfortunate enough to run across your trail. They'll make a bad mess of their game as sure as pop!"

"Don't flatter me so, Tubby," urged Rob, stretching before getting out of his warm nest. "To hear you get away with that soft-soap business, one would believe you must have emigrated from Ireland, and kissed the blarney-stone the last thing."

While all of them were dressing, Tubby continued to ply his questions until Rob told him he would make the greatest mistake of his life if he did not conclude to study for the bar.

"If you were a lawyer, Tubby," he said, half jesting, but with some seriousness as well, "you could wind the witnesses around your finger as easy as pie. Nobody could long resist that wheed-

ling tone, and that smile of yours. 'They would say almost anything you wanted them to, and that seems to be the aim of most lawyers, as far as I know. But I'm not trying to hold a single thing back, though you notice I speak softly, because you never know who may be in the next room.'

Tubby took the gentle hint and lowered his own voice. So far as Josh was concerned they no longer had any intention of keeping matters secret from him. Josh had impressed them as sincere and honest, and they liked him very much. Since he had lived in this section of country at one time, his knowledge in that particular might prove valuable to them. Besides, he was a very husky fellow and promised to be a good ally in case of a rough-and-tumble fight.

Several times Tubby went back to the subject of Rob's queer mode of getting back to the point from which he started, or rather the water-tank half a mile that side of Spencer, where he jumped from the train. It would seem that this unique mode of travel appealed to the fat scout more than anything else Rob had done. It might be, however, that Tubby was deeply impressed with

the wonderful ability shown by his comrade in utilizing the first means of travel that came along. Tubby could admire such genius even though not claiming to possess any himself.

They presently made their way downstairs and, to the joy of Tubby, there was another "delightful aroma" in the air, this time of coffee, ham, eggs and butter cakes, that gave evidence of the fact that the "wizard cook" was again on the job somewhere near by.

Rob had warned the others not to say a single word in connection with their business while in the taproom. Those who were loitering around might be innocent of any evil thought or intention, but they could not be sure of that, and it was always best to play "safety first."

"After breakfast we kin take a little walk," suggested Josh, in a seemingly careless fashion, "an' do our talkin' then, when nobody's around."

"A good idea," added Rob, at the same time glancing swiftly at the speaker as if he wondered whether Josh had made that remark in quite the innocent way he tried to assume, or had some motive back of it.

However, the clang of the breakfast bell came just then, and Tubby in deadly fear, evidently, lest all the places might be usurped before they could arrive, started in haste for the dining room.

It appeared that they had been in great luck when they selected that particular inn for their stopping place. It had lately changed hands, for the proprietor was evidently a complete stranger to Josh, which Rob thought a fortunate thing after all. Tubby even hinted that perhaps the new host had come out of New York, for certainly such a fine cook as he fetched with him could not be found in "any old place."

Rob refused to leave the table until Tubby consented to accompany him. Perhaps he was a little afraid the other might founder, though there was a certain limit for even Tubby to reach, and he had the good sense not to exceed his capacity, though no one ever knew to what limit that could be extended, for it was wonderfully elastic on occasions.

Ultimately, the trio found themselves outside, sauntering along the road in a new direction.

Josh had in a quiet way started them off, Rob again noticed, as though he might have some deep object in so doing. At least he had asked Rob what the time was on three separate occasions, and then seemed quite satisfied on learning that eight o'clock had arrived.

It was a brisk morning though clear overhead. The air was bracing to young and vigorous fellows, so that they naturally walked with a quick step. Over in the direction of the new town and the munition plant a heavy pall of black smoke hovered like a canopy that told of exceeding great bustle, and a mighty flow of business consequent upon the terrible war across the ocean. American industries along certain lines were booming with the task of supplying foreign countries with the multitude of things they so urgently needed; hundred of millions of dollars in gold kept coming over in payment for the shiploads of munitions, clothes, machinery and other things too numerous to mention that flowed in endless streams toward the embroiled East.

The boys soon began to talk once more of the serious affair upon which they were employed.

It was a subject calculated to engage their most careful attention, for the peril that hung over the munition plant was real, and not imaginary. Uncle Sam was involved in the deal, for should the vile plot of those unknown schemers be allowed to materialize, the blow to preparedness was going to be felt from California and Panama to the poorly protected Eastern coast, where a hostile fleet could, according to some authorities, land an army that would overrun the whole country long before a hastily organized force could be half drilled, and able to fight.

Rob amused himself in watching Josh slyly. He knew the fellow had something on his mind from his manner, and perhaps Rob could also give a pretty keen guess as to its nature. At any rate, he did not show much surprise when presently he saw Josh shade his eyes with his hand, and then exclaim in mock astonishment:

"I kinder think thar's a gal a-comin' along the road beyond thar, with a basket o' eggs on her arm; and say, 'twouldn't s'prise me none if she turned out to be my Susie!"

CHAPTER VIII.

GIVING JOSH A CHANCE.

"Oh! you sly Josh, you!"

As it was Tubby who gave vent to this exclamation, Rob realized that even the usually slow-witted fat scout had guessed that Josh had known all along that Susie would be coming along this road at just such an hour on certain mornings, bound to the village with a basket of freshly-laid eggs from her own flock of hens, and possibly intending to trade the same for a dress-pattern, some finery or something else fitted to her own needs.

Rob saw the young mechanic turn an entreating eye toward him, and could easily guess what Josh asked in that look.

"Come, Tubby, let's you and I step aside here and see what's in this patch of woods. There might be some queer formations for all we know, perhaps a hollow tree such as you squeezed into that time it poured down rain, and couldn't get

out of again, until some some of us had to chop it open to release you. Josh, don't walk too far away and forget you've got friends near by."

"I'd sure like you to meet Susie a little later on, boys," said Josh, whose face was burning with eagerness.

"P'raps we may," Rob told him, and at the same time drew Tubby aside.

They passed from sight in among the trees, but after that Tubby could not be kept from halting and "peeking."

"I'm a whole lot interested in that Josh, you see, Rob," he explained, as though realizing that some sort of apology were necessary for his conduct, "and I want to just see what his Susie is like. Guess it's allowable, and anyway they can't see me now. Who cares?"

Indeed, Rob was himself constrained to follow the example set by Tubby, for he also felt considerable curiosity concerning Susie, of whom Josh had been telling them so much ever since they met him.

Apparently the girl had discovered something familiar about the appearance of the man in the

road approaching her. She had stopped still and was staring hard at Josh. No doubt she was more or less astonished to see him there after having received such a terrible warning from her father as to what would happen to him if ever he dared seek her out again.

One little thing that occurred amused Rob considerably. He noticed that after Susie had apparently made sure that it was really her Josh she carefully deposited the basket on one side of the road while awaiting his coming.

"Bully for Susie!" Tubby exclaimed in admiration. "She's all to the good, and a sensible little woman. Think she wants to have her fresh eggs all jumbled and smashed up, when they're worth so much these cold days? Well, I guess nixey, and say, I admire her good sense. She'll take good care of Josh, once she starts to running *his* house for him."

Josh was running now, as though his impatience could not be further restrained. When he came to where that little figure, wearing the woolen scarf over her fluffy head, stood he gathered her in his arms.

"Guess we'd better turn away now!" suggested the satisfied Tubby, overcome perhaps by a sense of decorum. "I just wanted to make sure that she really did care for Josh, and now I know. She's got her both arms around his neck for keeps."

Rob was not sorry it had happened. If nothing more came of it they knew now that the story told by Josh must be founded on truth. There *was* a real Susie who loved the rough and unlucky fellow, and there must also be a genuine cruel parent who had parted them, simply because he did not believe Josh worthy of his daughter, nor capable of supporting her.

So Rob and Tubby took a turn around the woods, and hunted for any objects of interest that might be found there. They noticed the tracks of a rabbit in a little patch of snow that remained in a secluded corner of the fence that ran through the timber, and speculated on whether the fox that had undoubtedly chased after bunny had finally overtaken the "jumper" before he could reach his burrow again. They also found other things to interest them, though

from time to time Tubby would crane his fat neck in order to see what was going on up the road, and report progress to his mate. In fact, Rob had to remind him not to be too inquisitive.

"Well, they've stopped huggin' each other and seem to be doing a whole lot of talking, Rob," he remarked presently. "Guess she wants to know why he dared venture back to this dangerous section of country again when her father had told him what would happen if ever he found him snooping around until he could show that he held a fairly decent job that would bring in enough pay to settle the bills for two."

"Poor Josh! I feel sorry for him!" declared Rob. "He's a pretty decent sort of fellow, only one of those unlucky chaps that have everything go wrong. We must try and do something for him, Tubby, that's sure."

"I thought that was already settled, Rob. We certainly talked it over, and arranged that Josh was to have the reward, if there was anything coming our way for breaking up this nasty conspiracy. I think it would be a fine thing if we get him a job in the big factory. That's the least

the manager could do for having his plant saved from being blown up."

"Three to one we'll be able to land that, Tubby, so let's call it settled. If that should fall through, why we can take Josh back to Hampton with us, and some of our folks will find him work. The poor fellow ought to have a chance to be happy."

"Oh! he is happy right now, I think," gurgled Tubby. "That makes the four hundredth time, more or less, that he's kissed his wife, I imagine. Say, I wonder how long we'll have to stay here, Rob? We've about exhausted the interesting sights in this neck of the woods, I should remark. How would it do to step out and saunter along that way? You know Josh promised that we should meet Susie some time, and according to my mind that meeting is about due."

"Give them just five minutes more, 'Tubby," pleaded Rob, taking out his watch as if to time things in a systematic fashion. "If there's no sign of breaking away when it gets to the quarter hour, why we'll have to show ourselves."

"Huh! that's always the way," complained

Tubby. "When a fellow is completely wrapped up in something or other he just goes and forgets all about his faithful chums. I almost wish somebody would come along the road so as to bring Josh to his senses, so he might remember us."

Just then Rob happened to discover other small footprints in the frozen mud that lay close to a small icebound creek running through the woods.

"Hello! here's a mink's trail as sure as you're born, Tubby!" he exclaimed, desiring to hold the attention of the other until the time limit had expired, for Tubby was growing restless. "Let's follow it a bit along the stream, and see if we can find where the sly little animal has his den among the rocks or under the great roots of some tree, as is usually the case."

So they bent over, walking slowly, and talking as they went, though as a rule it was the scout master who did the latter, since Tubby did not know all he might be expected to concerning the habits of the small fur-bearing animals likely to be found in a Jersey woods.

Just as Rob had anticipated they speedily came to a locality that looked well adapted to offer a

secure hiding-place for a cunning mink. It was on the edge of the watercourse, where he could hunt for fresh fish in the summer time, frogs it might be, or any other dainty that appealed to his appetite.

"And there's where he goes in and out, Tubby, you notice," said Rob, pointing down close to his feet with a touch of satisfaction in his voice, for it always pleased him to accomplish things he set out to do, no matter if it was such a simple thing as following a lone mink to its den under the rocks and roots.

"I should think that five minutes might be nearly up by now, Rob?" remarked Tubby plaintively, showing that through it all he had not forgotten the promise made by his companion.

"It is, all but one minute," admitted the other, "and I'll use that in scouting around here to see if there is another exit to Mr. Mink's home. Sometimes they have a rear door, which is to provide a means of escape in case a dog enters at one opening. You see, only for that, the poor thing would be at the mercy of an enemy. That's only another splendid lesson along the lines of

preparedness, Tubby. In fact, when we look around us we can see that every created thing but man always makes it a point to provide against an evil day. He alone goes blindly on his way, trusting to sheer luck to escape the pitfalls."

"Well, mark me," asserted Tubby, firmly, "it's going to be a whole lot different in *this* country after now. We've learned our little lesson from what's happening across the water, and never again will Uncle Sam be caught napping. The whole Nation is waking up to the fact that we ought to be ready for any cataclysm—that's a good word, eh, Rob?—that could come upon us. How about that minute now?"

"Let's go," said the other, replacing his little nickel watch, whereupon Tubby smiled again as though really glad their period of inaction had reached its conclusion.

When they reached a spot from which they could look along the road, Tubby gave an exclamation of surprise and disgust.

"Why, Rob, they're gone!" he cried. "Josh has played a joke on us! That five minutes did the business!"

"Don't be so fast, Tubby. Look sharper and you'll see them walking along by the side of the road. That tree hid them for a few seconds. Come, we'll start along, and Josh will have to introduce his friends to his little wife. I'm sure we would like to meet her."

"Guess you're right, Rob," muttered the fat scout, humbly. "My eyes deceived me that time. I ought to have judged Josh better'n that, though. But then the poor fellow is so excited over meeting Susie again that like as not he hardly does know what he's doing. I hope he remembers our names, when he comes to tell her how we've been such good friends to him."

They started along the road, gradually drawing closer to the pair ahead. Josh had his arm around the slender waist of his wife, and doubtless he was telling her for the tenth time how he could not stay away a day longer, no matter what danger menaced him in venturing back to the old stamping ground, which her father had meant should be a "closed preserve" for him.

And Susie would not be sorry to know that she had such drawing powers for the man of

her choice, even though she might also deplore his audacity in taking such risks.

"There's some one coming on a horse over yonder, where there seems to be a private road leading out of some farm!" remarked Tubby, just at that interesting point; "and say, they're so much wrapped up in each other I'm blessed if they pay the least attention to him. Rob, do you think it could be possible now that man is her awful dad? See him swing that nasty looking riding-whip, would you? Rob, as sure as you live I believe that's old Beare! He looks as mad as a hornet. He must have sighted the couple while on his way to the road, and he's coming down on the poor innocents like a house afire! Whew! what's our move, Rob, tell me?"

Rob himself saw that Tubby had in all probability hit the target in the center of the bullseye when he ventured upon that assertion. The manner in which the man on horseback urged his steed forward seemed to prove it.

"All we can do is to hurry," he told Tubby, "for he's already close upon them."

As they pushed on, bent upon reaching the

scene of action so as to back Josh up they saw the horseman suddenly break out upon the main road, and urging his steed forward reach the spot where the girl was shrinking behind Josh. At the same time the riding-whip was raised high in the air as if to strike.

CHAPTER IX.

THE VALUE OF GOOD FRIENDS.

Tubby held his very breath with awe; he was also utterly unable to make the sudden spurt Rob did.

He fully anticipated seeing that riding-whip fall with a fierce swish on the unprotected head and shoulders of Josh, and expected that a terrible hand-to-hand fight must inevitably follow. Indeed, the girl herself seemed to look for nothing less, for she gave a piteous little squeal and seemingly tried to throw herself between the two men.

Then Tubby saw Josh with one sweep of his brawny arm push her behind him. It was as if all the manhood in his rugged nature declined to allow his little wife to try and stand between him and danger.

So he faced the angry farmer, and there must have been something in his flashing eyes that warned Mr. Beare not to go too far if he valued

his safety; at least, that threatening whip failed to descend.

Tubby would never forget that picture, it was so real, so grand. Josh arose fifty per cent in his estimation. At least he had proved himself to be a *man*, even if hard luck did seem to camp continually on his trail.

By now Rob had arrived on the scene, and his coming gave the farmer an excuse for letting his upraised arm drop without attempting to carry his implied threat into execution.

"What are you doing around here, Josh Whittlesby, when I warned you what you would get if you dared come where you wasn't wanted? Didn't you think I meant it?"

When Josh heard his father-in-law say this he knew that so far as deeds went the storm was temporarily past. Apparently Josh was somewhat on his dignity, for there was Susie looking on, hardly knowing whether to admire her husband or fear her parent most.

"They ain't no law that I knows on, Mr. Beare," he said, calmly enough, "that sez a man ain't free to walk the public roads of the State

o' New Jersey as much as he likes, so long's he behaves himself."

"But I saw you with your arm around my daughter, and I told you I wouldn't allow that until you'd proved your worth," fumed the man on the champing horse.

Josh thereupon grinned, and naively remarked:

"But Susie is my wife, Mr. Beare!"

"I don't care a cent about that!" growled the obdurate parent. "You wheedled her into running away, and then lost your job, just as you had done many times before. 'Then you expected me to take you in and support you, but I declined. When you had half starved my girl I came and took her away from you, and at her old home she is going to stay until you can give her one in place of it. How dare you come sneaking around here trying to see her again, tell me that?"

"Why, ye see, sir, Susie and me we think all the world o' each other. 'Thar ain't anything I wouldn't do for *her*, and she knows it. I've had hard luck in the past, an' lost three jobs that promised to be stiddy just beca'se the firms busted up or consolidated. But I'm hopin' to

land something good right now, Mr. Beare, I give ye my word I am."

"Oh! is that so? Seems to me I've heard that same promise before, but I'm too old a bird to be caught twice in the same trap. You'll have to show me first. Susie, come here!"

Susie looked frightened. Evidently she hardly knew whether to obey her father's gruff command, as doubtless she had been accustomed to doing from childhood, or assume a new independence and defy him. But Josh was diplomatic enough to realize he had not yet attained a pinnacle from which he could venture to claim his own and tell the rich old farmer what he thought of him.

So he gently took hold of Susie's quivering hand, deliberately kissed her in the presence of her raging father, and gave her a little push toward him.

"Go with him, Susie," he said softly, and with a smile of new confidence that must have encouraged her exceedingly. "It'll only be fur a little while. I'm on my way, and I'll soon be where I kin support ye. Then all the fathers on earth

cain't keep me from gittin' ye. That's about all I got to say. But I means every word o' it."

"Bully for Josh!" Tubby was muttering half under his breath, as he stood there gaping, and never losing a single word that was being said. The little scene struck Tubby as being one of the most interesting things he had ever witnessed in all his varied experience.

Rob thought it might do no harm to put in a word for Josh. He felt that as a scout he could do no less, since every fellow who wears the khaki is expected to stand up for a comrade through thick and thin.

He could easily see that the old farmer was one of those men with an iron will. By dint of hard labor and much stinting he had succeeded in amassing a comfortable little fortune, and as he had only one child, Susie, it was perhaps only natural for him to suspect that Josh Witlesby had courted her simply to become his heir.

Rob also knew that such a man has to be carefully handled; that Mr. Beare, well named, could only be convinced by actual facts and figures, for

he was a hard-headed man, with little of sentiment in his composition. Rob did not wish to offend him in any way, lest he make Josh's road the more rocky. He was greatly interested in this new friend, considering Josh a jewel in the rough.

"Mr. Beare," he now said, assuming his most winning smile, "Josh has not introduced us as his friends, so I'll have to tell you who we are. Both of us hail from the town of Hampton, Long Island. My name is Rob Blake, and that of my chum here is Tubby Hopkins. We came down here on a matter of business for his folks, and I hope you will not take it amiss if I ask you just a question or two in connection with our friend Josh here. May I, sir?"

The farmer looked at Rob as though he hardly knew how to answer him. In meeting those frank eyes and genial smile he fell under the spell, as many others had done before.

"I haven't any objection answering an honestly put question, boy," he grumbled, "only I want you to understand that I never change my mind. All the talk in the world won't make me take

that shirker into my family like he wants me to. If ever he does get my daughter he's got to earn her. That's final. Now go on and ask what you've a mind to."

Josh started forward as though half inclined to furiously object when he heard that word "shirker," to which he evidently objected; but Susie was seen to hold up her hands entreatingly, and Josh accordingly subsided, though with ill grace.

"I only wanted to ask you, sir, if his inability to keep a steady job is the only thing you hold against Josh here?" continued Rob bluntly. "He doesn't drink, he tells us, and never had a bad reputation in the neighborhood; only it seems as if the ladder broke, or else fell, every time he managed to get a foot on a rung and expected to be able to climb up. How about that, Mr. Beare?"

"Oh, I own up that the fellow isn't so bad, except that he's lazy, and in my eyes that is a cardinal sin. I've had to hustle all my life for every cent I earned, and no shiftless chap is going to fasten himself on me like a barnacle does on a

ship's bottom. Let him prove his worth, say I, and then it'll be time for us to talk business."

Josh had stood about all he could of this. He now pushed forward again and, facing the farmer, said firmly:

"I expects to git a steady job right soon, Mr. Beare, and I'm a-tellin' ye jest this, that as quick as I kin feel safe in doin' it I'm meanin' to come, backed by the law o' the land, an' take Susie away with me for keeps. Then it'll be *you* that'll have to beg me to let ye see her. Mebbe you'll know how ye've made two honest hearts suffer all because o' the spite ye took against me, when ye could easy enough got me a position in a machine shop. Them's the last words I expect to have with ye till I come for my wife."

Rob thought they were well put, and really he had not expected that Josh could have expressed the deep feelings that surged through his heart one-half so convincingly.

At any rate they rather staggered the old farmer, who scowled and gritted his teeth, yet failed to burst out into the torrent of hard words that in the past would have followed such a plain

defiance to his will. Rob actually believed Josh was making an impression on his obdurate father-in-law. He wondered if it might not be good policy to put in another good word in favor of the new-found friend.

"I want to say this, sir, before we part," Rob observed. "Josh will have a job at good pay very shortly. This time he'll stick to it like a leech, because the business is not going to smash; for his position may be in that new munition plant over the way, near Spencer. Give him one more chance to make good and it'll be best for everybody concerned."

Mr. Beare sneered.

"I happen to have a little interest in that plant myself. Fact is, half of my money is invested there," he went on to say sharply. "But I warn you that if he goes around using my name as his reference he'll be making the biggest mistake of his life. I'll tell them the truth about him, and they'll be sure to turn him down if he makes application for work there."

"Don't worry about that, Mr. Beare," said Rob, with apparent indifference. "We expect to

be his reference, and the chances are ten to one he'll land the best job that ever came his way."

"Oh! you don't say?" remarked the farmer incredulously, with a look as if to add: "Now, who under the sun might you be, and what difference will it make to the manager of the munition plant if a dozen like you recommend a man whose record is poor?"

Rob did not intend to enlighten him any further. He believed he had succeeded in investing his remark with an air of mystery that might keep Mr. Beare guessing. At the same time it gave the farmer to understand that poor, down-trodden Josh had at last found friends worth while.

Susie gave Rob one look that well repaid him for the little trouble he had taken. Doubtless this was about the first time she had ever heard Josh defended, and, being a loyal little thing, the novelty of the experience pleased her immensely.

"Where did you leave your basket of eggs, Susie?" asked the farmer gruffly, as if desirous of ending an unprofitable interview.

"Down the road a piece, dad," she answered, with a quaver in her voice.

"Then come with me, and I'll ride over to the village with you and back," he continued. "After this there'll be a change in programme at our place. I'm not meaning that you shall be on the road unattended while there are so many strangers around this section. You want to remember, Josh Whittlesby, that if you so much as set a foot on my land I'll have you arrested for trespass. That's about all for you!"

He started his horse, and Susie, walking alongside, passed from Josh, who stood there with his eyes riveted on her demure little form as though his whole soul went forth in that look.

Tubby held his peace. He did not want to break in on the sacred feelings of the bereaved Josh. As for Rob, he felt more determined than ever, after witnessing this little domestic drama, that something must be done to put Josh where he could boldly claim his own despite parental objections, and find the happiness he deserved.

Once Susie looked around. It was just after she had picked up her basket and no doubt fell

back a pace. They had a fleeting glimpse of her sunny face, and caught the saucy wave of her little hand; then she continued on alongside her stern parent. But Josh did not move, and hardly seemed to even breathe as long as she was in sight.

CHAPTER X.

THE GATHERING OF THE CLANS.

"We're going to stand by you, Josh, never fear," said Rob.

The other turned and looked toward him with something approaching entreaty in his honest eyes, glistening strangely, though he was winking rapidly as though ashamed to let them see how he had given way to emotion.

"It certainly does me a heap o' good to hear you say that, Rob!" declared Josh. "Tell me, if ye think the little gal is wuth wrestlin' for with her ugly old daddy?"

"Don't blame you a bit," said Tubby unreservedly. "She's a jewel, Josh. Some day I hope you'll have her installed in a comfy home of your own. Then the old Beare will have to ask permission to wipe *his* boots on your doormat."

They turned their faces again toward the tavern. Josh had apparently accomplished the main object of his walk, and did not seem to care about

extending it any further. As for Rob, he felt a little anxious lest the boys from Hampton arrive earlier than expected, and find them gone.

No one was waiting for them, however, and so they sat around in the taproom, or walked up and down the long porch that extended across the whole front of the inn, for the air was what Tubby called "nippy," which meant it caused the blood to tingle, and prevented them from sitting down any length of time lest they take cold.

Suddenly Tubby chanced to make a discovery.

"What's this I see down the road there, Rob? Seems to me there must be a fire, with everybody running to it. Leastways there are three fellows on the dogtrot, and heading this way. Hey! would you believe it, they're wearing scout duds! Rob, can it be possible they're our chums?"

"That's certainly Merritt Crawford heading the bunch!" exclaimed the patrol leader, joyously, "and unless my eyes deceive me Andy Bowles is just back of him, while that third fellow—yes, I think it must be Sim Jeffords. I've never forgotten that odd way he has of holding his head as he runs, as if ready to look behind

him every little while. I've often taken him to task for it, and told him no good runner ever looks back; but it's such a habit with Sim he can't break himself of it."

"Hurrah!" cried Tubby, at once snatching off his hat and waving it wildly.

The oncoming boys must have been watching for they immediately answered with a series of hearty cheers and much waving of head-gear, as is the custom of scouts on sighting each other.

Presently they came up, panting a little from their exertions. Merritt was a well set-up fellow. He held the position of corporal in the troop. Andy Bowles, a more compactly built boy, was the authorized bugler, and the possessor of a good voice as well. Sim Jeffords had long ago reached the dignity of being a first-class scout, and wore several medals that told of his studious habits along certain lines.

"We thought we might be later than you expected," explained Merritt, "so we started to run the whole way over here from the station. Must have been a mile or more. How are you, Rob, and you too, Tubby? What's in the wind down here,

tell us? Your night letter only gave enough information to keep us guessing, and whet our curiosity."

"Just what I meant it should," laughed Rob. "First of all let me introduce a new friend here in Josh Whittlesby. Suppose we take a little walk, so we can have a good chat without any danger of being overheard."

His words sounded rather mysterious, and added to the excitement under which the three scouts who had just arrived were laboring. They shook hands with Josh, and in such a cordial way that the young mechanic knew they would turn out to be as good friends as Rob and Tubby had already proven themselves.

Strung out across the road they started walking in a leisurely fashion, with Rob in the middle, two scouts flanking him on either side, and Josh bringing up the rear, listening in part to what was being said, and doing more or less *looking*, possibly, in the vague hope that Susie might loom up again in the distance.

Rob went about things in his usual matter-of-fact way. He commenced at the very beginning,

telling how they had first met Josh under peculiar conditions, and of course he held the attention of the three newcomers as soon as he told about discovering some one struggling in the middle of the big pond, having broken through the rotten ice.

The manner in which the rescue had been effected did not surprise Merritt, Andy or Sim, for every fellow in Hampton Troop had long ago been taught just how to go about saving lives placed in deadly peril through such a catastrophe as breaking through the ice.

Rob only briefly touched upon the domestic affairs of Josh, for he meant that as time progressed the boys should learn more about Susie and the stern parent. He soon had them straining their ears to hear what he said about the plot against the munition plant, for the scouts could easily understand what a terrible thing it would be should the mysterious conspirators succeed in destroying even a part of the vast workshop that was turning out explosives and other things needed in the new plan for preparedness.

He had to also let them into the secret given

into his possession by Mr. Wainwright, and which concerned the fact, known to but few, that it was for the United States Government much of the material was being done over in Spencer—that a hurry call had gone out to replenish the slack war-chest of Uncle Sam, desperately in need of all sorts of munitions, with a possible entry into the big World War looming up along the near horizon.

Those boys hung on his every word. They were thrilled to the bone as Merritt declared. Being extremely patriotic, as indeed all scouts must be to fill their high calling with credit, they again and again announced their readiness to do and dare anything and everything in order to assist in muffling the scheme of the plotters, whoever they might turn out to be.

“We’re heart and soul in favor of this campaign of preparedness you speak about, Rob,” said Merritt earnestly, after everything had been told. “It’s a part of our system, and indeed, the life of our calling to be always ready for service, no matter how suddenly the summons may come.”

“To think that we’re going to work hand in

glove with Uncle Sam's Secret Service revenue officers!" added Sim Jeffords, as though that fact interested him more than all else combined. "Strikes me they're getting to depend on the scouts more and more every day. There are few big things that take place all over the country but what you read that the scouts took part."

"Well," observed Tubby with the air of an oracle, "just remember that this is a mighty serious piece of business all around, and we've got to show that we're able to handle things cleverly if we hope to win out. Blowing up a munition plant is getting to be too common an amusement in this country of ours, and it's high time there was a stop put to the game."

"But who's doing it all do you think, Rob?" asked Andy Bowles.

"Now you've got me cornered," admitted the patrol leader with a short laugh. "I only wish I knew. Then I would be in position to hand over some valuable information that might bring the guilty parties to book in a hurry."

"Rob, can it be emissaries from the German Government, do you believe?" demanded Sim,

first looking cautiously around him as though he feared lest the breeze might carry his words to some secreted spy, and cause immediate trouble for them all.

"That is always possible, because Germany claims she is fighting for her life; and as Uncle Sam's folks are supplying her enemies with a big part of their war munitions it would be only common justice, some people think, if the plants that are making explosives and arms be damaged, or strikes started that would tie them up as tight as a drum. But so far as I can find out from what the papers say, up to now they haven't made out a strong case against those who have been arrested."

"But you don't believe any of our American citizens who come of German or Austrian stock are interested in this dangerous game, do you, Rob?" Merritt asked.

"I should hate to think so," he was told, slowly, and with a shake of the head. "I'm of the opinion that most of our naturalized citizens are for America first of all, though it would be only natural for them to stand up for the Old Country

as against the Allies. But later on we may know more about this than we do now. Wait a bit and let's see what happens."

So they strolled along and talked. Many questions were asked and answered by Rob the best he knew how, until in the end the newcomers were about as well posted as himself and Tubby.

When noon came they had dinner, and Tubby found that there were some others who could join with him in declaring the tavern cook to be a marvel in the line of getting up dishes that tempted poor boys to eat almost to the limit of their capacity.

"Every time I sit down here, and have these dishes shoved at me on every side," complained Tubby, after they had reached the point where a retreat from the table had to be ordered by Rob, "it makes me think of the city urchin who crawled into an empty hogshead that had contained sugar, and looking at all the sweetness around him cried out: 'Oh! for a thousand tongues!' And so I find myself wishing my legs might be hollow and empty."

"How about your head, Tubby?" Andy in-

stantly asked, at which mean thrust the fat boy pretended to frown, and then shook a warning finger at the speaker.

Rob was now hoping to have some energetic looking stranger making inquiries concerning him, for he fancied it about time Washington was heard from. Surely Mr. Wainwright would not let the grass grow under his feet in sending some of his trusted agents in the direction of the threatened munition plant at Spencer in the State of New Jersey.

Whenever any one happened to pass along the road in a car, Rob would eye him suspiciously, wondering if that could be the expected messenger who was to approach him and ask for the full particulars as known to the scouts. Many times he found himself disappointed, yet returned to his task grimly, feeling positive the meeting was bound to take place before a great while.

Tubby, who had been "mousing around," as he called it, on his own hook, looking at the pigs and the chickens kept at the rear of the stables, came up to Rob about this time and remarked:

"I've scraped an acquaintance with a chap over

yonder who says he's a sort of horse-trader and farmer combined, expecting to do some business with the people of the munition plant, because he happens to own some property just outside their stockade and which they'll have to buy when they enlarge their grounds. Rob, he seems to be a whole lot interested in Boy Scouts, for he asked questions of me about where we came from, who we all were, and so forth. 'Course, I kept my head about me, and didn't let a single thing slip that would make him think we were down here for anything but attending to my dad's business. There he is coming this way now, and going to the house, I reckon."

Rob looked up to take notice of the man. He may have entertained a slight suspicion that perhaps the man was connected in some wise with the cunning plotters who were meaning to rob Uncle Sam. So far as he could tell the man appeared to be just what he claimed. As he went past them, however, he turned toward Rob, and with a quick glance around muttered one word in his ear.

It was "Wainwright."

CHAPTER XI.

A MAN OF THE SECRET SERVICE.

It was past the middle of that wintry afternoon when this incident occurred, and Rob suddenly awoke to the fact that while he had been on the lookout for a mysterious looking stranger to come along, this simple appearing farmer had turned out to be the identical man for whom he was watching.

"Wait for me at the house, fellows," he said hastily, and then sauntered after the pretended horse-trader, who had changed his course now and was moving in another direction.

When they were sufficiently removed to avoid all danger of their conversation being overheard, the man stopped and allowed the scout to overtake him. Rob felt a wonderfully keen pair of gray eyes fastened on his face; then a soft voice said:

"You are Rob Blake, I take it, from what Mr. Wainwright told me in describing you. My name

is Simpson, Caleb Simpson, and I work under him in the Bureau."

"I have heard him speak of you, sir," said Rob, taking the extended hand eagerly. "I'm glad he chose to send so important a gentleman up this way."

He was indeed vastly interested in the meeting, because Mr. Wainwright had told him of many difficult and hazardous exploits which this agent had undertaken in behalf of the Government, usually meeting with wonderful success.

On his part Caleb Simpson must have also heard some things spoken of by Rob's good friend at the National Capital, for he was surveying the boy's face with those shrewd eyes of his. Apparently he found much encouragement there, for he nodded his head as though pleased that the reports about Rob were well founded.

"The sooner we get to a complete understanding of this serious matter," he immediately remarked in his business-like way, "the better. As I understand it the scheme is likely to come to a head to-night, and so there will be considerable work to be accomplished in a brief time. So please

start in, Rob, and tell me how you first learned about the plot."

Rob was a good story-teller, and he certainly held Mr. Simpson spellbound during the recital of how he and Tubby had saved the life of Josh, and then learned incidentally how that worthy had overheard the secret conversation between the two conspirators known as Cooney and the "Boss."

After it had been all told, Mr. Simpson asked questions, and these were as sharp and as much to the point as though he were a criminal lawyer, with an important witness on the stand from whom he anticipated extracting convincing testimony.

When all was said and done Mr. Simpson appeared to reflect, while Rob watched his face eagerly, wondering what he could be thinking of it.

"The next thing for me to do is to have a little talk with your Josh," the gentleman presently remarked. "I hope to find that he can be relied on to tell the truth. Everything depends on that point. This is too serious a business to take

chances with I suppose you have implicit confidence in his word, Rob?"

"According to my mind, sir, Josh is the straightest sort of a fellow you'd meet in a day's drive. His weakness has been in running off with a rich farmer's only daughter, getting married, and then losing his job so he couldn't support her. She's at home in her father's care. But we've promised Josh that if things turn out half-way decent he is to have a position at the plant worth while."

Mr. Simpson's eyes glowed with sudden warmth.

"That's just the kind of a boy Mr. Walwright said Rob Blake was," he remarked, cordially. "I'm glad to find it's a fact. I hope all scouts are of the same type, for it would make them a credit to their country. Now let me ask you a few more questions that occur to me, after which I'm going to have you send Josh out here for a little talk. Tell him who I am, and that all I want him to do is to be square with me. I'll see to it that he gets a job worth while."

When, a little later on, Josh learned what

awaited him he looked somewhat worried. Rob felt sure that this was caused wholly by his nervousness with regard to being placed on the rack by a celebrated agent of the Government. He was pleased to see Josh square his shoulders.

He walked down to where the other awaited him, and they were together for quite some time. Tubby seemed to feel more or less concern about Josh, for he kept looking in that direction, and making occasional comments.

"There, they've separated now, boys," he finally announced, "and here comes Josh back to join us. Seems to be grinning, which, I take it, is a good sign. After all, he didn't find the gentleman such an ogre. I'd like to meet him myself some time or other, though he couldn't be expected to want to waste any of his precious minutes on such an obscure individual as Tubby Hopkins. Hello! there, Josh! How's everything moving along, and did you get on with Rob's new friend?"

Josh looked quite satisfied. There was apparently no occasion for him to borrow trouble. Evidently his interview with Mr. Simpson had

left him in a comfortable frame of mind, Rob understood.

"He's all to the good, Tubby," he hastened to say. "Gosh! such a man fur gettin' ye to open up! I'm clean pumped dry. But he 'peared to be satisfied, and as good as promised that I'd be put into a right smart situation soon. I c'n see the silver linin' to that dark cloud, boys, just as ye was tellin' me about. It's all right, and I hope they ketch the foxy plotters, sure I do. An' it'll tickle me right to *help* ketch 'em!"

"Ditto here, Josh!" echoed Tubby, fervently.

Rob was expecting that Mr. Simpson would now assume full charge, and in due time the scouts anticipated hearing from him as to how they could best assist in rounding up the plotters. Indeed, the patrol leader felt a great load taken from his shoulders, for he realized what a tremendous undertaking it would have proven for himself and chums to try and baffle a desperate band of schemers who meant to carry out some dreadful plan of campaign.

Now it would be all right, because the man from Washington was accustomed to deal with

such unscrupulous characters, and would know just how to go about effecting their downfall.

"We are to hang about the inn here so he will know where to find us later on," Rob explained to the others. "That was as far as he could speak just yet, for, of course, his plans are not wholly matured. But he told me we could rest satisfied we would be in the running, and assigned an important post in the bargain. He said we certainly deserved full credit for having discovered the infamous plot, and he meant to see that we got our deserts."

"Well, anyway," mused Tubby, as though he found considerable satisfaction in one feature of the prospect, "that means we'll be *compelled* to stay here over supper-time, which is exactly six o'clock; and it's nearly four now, upon my word. Two hours more will do it. I guess we can stand for it, fellows."

The three new arrivals wanted to know what Tubby meant by all that sort of talk, and naturally the fat scout was not at all unwilling to post them.

Rob left him dilating at length on the remark-

able virtues of the unknown head of the culinary department connected with the wayside inn. With Josh at his side the patrol leader went into the house and up to their room, for he had taken a notion to ask the young machinist more about his past, partly to while away some of the time that was hanging heavily on his hands while waiting to hear from Mr. Simpson.

Josh laid bare his whole life to his new and sympathizing friend. He told of his aspirations, his dreams, and the hard luck that seemed to haunt him whenever he struck a paying job. There seem to be some unfortunate fellows whom Fate pursues in that strange way for a long while; then it may be there comes a sudden change, and fortune's frowns turn to smiles.

Rob continually buoyed up the spirits of Josh, so that again and again the other repeated, what he had previously said, that it was the luckiest day in all his life when his calls for help brought Rob Blake to his relief. He even declared he was glad he had tried to cross that big pond when common discretion should have warned him the ice was unsafe.

"Things are all a-workin' for me nowadays," he observed happily, "and once they gits to car-ryin' ye along with the current it's an easy thing to win out. I c'n just shut my eyes an' see a little cottage with roses a-climbin' all over it, for Susie's a great hand with flowers; and thar she stands by the gate a-waitin' for me to come home from the shop. And the best o' it all is, it's a-goin' to come true this time, and not be on'y a dream."

Rob quite enjoyed this little chat. It showed him that Josh was sterling to the bone. He might seem a bit simple to some people, but Susie believed in him, and on that firm foundation his whole future was going to be built.

Just then there came a dreadful clattering of feet on the stairs as though some heavy body might be climbing upward, and making many mis-steps in showing such tremendous haste.

Rob thought of Tubby the first thing. The fat scout was always clumsy in his actions, and when he got excited, as often happened, he had been known to "fall all over himself," as his friends called it.

Bob jumped to his feet. He realized that if Tabby was coming in such a distressed state something must have occurred to excite him. It would be connected with the mysterious complaint in which they were enlisted.

Close came the minute. Then the door was burst open, and sure enough, Tabby appeared in view, gasping for breath, his face the color of a rusty gutter's head, and his eyes meaning ready to jump from their sockets.

When Tabby had reached this point of utter exhaustion there was no one trying to shake him in order to make him speak, for that would only aggravate matters. From long experience Bob knew that the best way was to pay no attention to the heavily panting man until he could catch his breath again, and begin to articulate his words.

So Bob held himself in check and tried to maintain his impudence. Jack looked as though unable to understand whether Tabby had been taken with a fit from overeating, or was doing some imaginary starvation. He just stood there and watched to see what would happen next.

With each intake of breath the fat boy grew more composed. He nodded his head as if to assure Rob he understood and appreciated the other's wisdom in leaving him alone to recover his wind. Presently, with an effort, he managed to say something in detached sentences, each being accompanied with a sort of grunt.

"Something doing, Rob—they act like they'd come to stay here, too—bet you so many more mouths to fill is going to run the grub short in the bargain, hang the luck!"

"Who are you talking about, Tubby?" asked Rob, whereupon the other made motions with his hands, and then managed to say:

"Remember the Boss, don't you, Rob, that fellow Josh told us about, and who we saw pass in that racy-looking car—well, he's just entered the inn wagonyard with two men crowded in alongside him; and, Rob, believe me, both of them have dark faces, and look to me like they might be foreigners! Whee! but it's beginning to get pretty warm around this section of country, seems like. I wonder now what they're after?"

CHAPTER XII.

THE COMING OF THE CONSPIRATORS.

"When did this happen, Tubby?" was what Rob flashed at him, and perhaps unconsciously giving the fat scout a little shake at the same time, for be it known that Tubby was apt to get a bit confused when telling facts, and often had to be stirred up in some fashion.

"Just now, Rob, give you my word for it."

"You came straight up here, did you?"

"Sure thing, Rob. I knew you were in the room. But you can't see their car from here," Tubby continued, as the other made a start toward one of the windows with which the second story bedroom was adorned.

"Did they act as though bent on staying any length of time, or had they just dropped in while passing, to get a drink or something?" questioned Rob.

"Why, the Boss was getting out of the car when I started," Tubby explained. "He seemed

to be telling the other men to sit there until he had found out something or other. It struck me he was bent on learning whether they could get a room here for the night. It would be mighty convenient, you see, Rob."

That was, indeed, a point worth considering, and for once the slow-witted Tubby may have hit on the exact truth, Rob believed. He knew that it was up to him to think fast. This might prove to be a very important factor in the carrying out of Mr. Simpson's counter plot intended to baffle the dark designs of the munition plant conspirators.

All this talk had really taken place in less time than it takes to give it here, for Rob's questions flew like wildfire. Mr. Simpson must be informed of this new event, if it happened that none of his men had discovered it for themselves. It would locate the leading spirit in the plot against Uncle Sam, and that must always be a point worth considering.

"Come, lead the way down again, Tubby!" he told the other, briskly. "You stay up here, Josh. The less that man sees of you the better, I imag-

ine, for I've got an idea he suspects you. Get that?"

Josh said he did, and that he would wait for them there. Plainly, the fellow was a little disappointed not to be given an opportunity to take part in what was about to happen; but he had come to recognize the signs of leadership in Rob, and no thought of disobedience occurred to his mind.

Tubby was already making for the door. He looked flushed as with newly awakened pride, for had not Rob just bade him "lead the way," and it was not often the stout scout had such honors conferred upon his shoulders.

Had any outsider chanced to be present to observe the remarkable way in which Tubby was tiptoeing along, as though fearful lest his footsteps on the stairs might betray him to cunning and hostile ears, he must have smiled. The exhibition was truly comical, and yet Tubby did not know that, for he was doing the best he knew how in his elephantine way. He did manage to walk softly, because most of these stout boys are exceedingly light on their feet, either on the

dance floor or when coming home after hours in the night-time.

Down the stairs they went, Rob always on the alert to discover whether the man they had come to call the Boss could be in the taproom talking with the landlord. The stairs lay in a hall, and the taproom adjoined this, so that when the connecting door was partly open, as it generally happened to be, one could get a fair view of the lounging apartment where the stove stood, around which more or less comfort was to be found.

Rob had his eyes fixed upon this door. He saw that it was almost closed, and this circumstance pleased him very much, for it afforded them an opportunity to pass on to the end of the hall without being noticed by those in the place. Besides, he could take an observation, unseen by any eye, and find out just who occupied the taproom.

A slight draught of cold air warned him that the outer door must be open; and looking across he could see the landlord standing there in his shirt-sleeves, as though speaking to some one without.

Rob listened eagerly, for occasional words floated in to him, the men in the room having ceased their song which they had been trolling in company—perhaps the owner of the place had called out angrily to them a minute or so before not to make so much noise.

“Room big enough—two beds—glad to accommodate you and your friends overnight—come right in, sir, and make yourself at home—that’s what we’re here for, to serve the public—no trouble at all, sir!”

When Rob caught these broken sentences, each word called out by the landlord to some unseen person without, he knew just how the situation stood. Tubby had hit upon the truth when he guessed that the trio of conspirators had chosen to stop overnight at the roadside inn, which would be so conveniently situated to the object of their plotting, the munition works.

The settling of this question somehow seemed to give Rob a certain amount of satisfaction. It is always a good point to know where you stand when anything above the ordinary calls for attention. Rob disliked groping in the dark, or

grappling with an unknown adversary. He much preferred to fight in the open, football-style, where he could see his antagonist, and meet danger face to face.

He supposed that the men, after leaving their car, would enter by way of the taproom door, and not wishing to be seen, Rob concluded to pass out of the hall exit. Once in the open, perhaps they could manage to get sight of those in whom they felt such keen interest.

He was already laying plans in that active brain of his. If the scheming trio meant to put up at the tavern for the night it was evident they were bound to meet them at the supper table, so that Merritt, Andy and Sim must all be warned how to play their cards in order that no suspicion might fall upon their heads.

All that would be necessary was for them to appear natural. Boy Scouts may be seen almost anywhere in these days when there are nearly two hundred thousand members of the famous order in the United States alone. It is not unusual to run across the wearers of the khaki on the summit of Pikes Peak, or in the Great Canyon of the

Colorado, while amidst the Big Woods of California, through Yellowstone Park, and in hundreds of Eastern summer and winter resorts.

Hence the fact that five boys belonging to the association should be putting up at this country inn need not in itself excite any wonder or curiosity, should they act as their kind usually do, full of good humor, and real boys' comradeship.

It might even do for them to evince a natural interest in the new munition plant, some parts of which they had hopes of being permitted to visit, so as to get a superficial knowledge as to how various articles in great use among the warring nations of Europe were being manufactured on a large scale.

In the short space of time that was consumed in passing along the hall to the outer door, Rob had fixed upon this plan of campaign. It was simply wonderful how the boy could decide knotty points almost in a flash; but after all, this very faculty was the gift that made him the natural-born leader he proved himself among his mates.

Just as he had anticipated, once they passed out at the hall door and they found themselves on

the side of the tavern opposite to the wagonyard, where farmers were wont to leave their teams while on the way home from market, and wash down at the bar the white dust of the road in their throats.

One quick look around told Rob which way they had better take in order to observe what might be going on at the other side of the house. By passing through what was a little garden in the good old summer-time, they could reach a trellis over which a grape-vine spread. Here, while fairly well concealed themselves, they could use their eyes to advantage, and watch what went on beyond.

Had Rob been given the arrangement of things himself, he could hardly have fixed them better than they were found to be. It was as though fortune played into their hands. Even Tubby was chuckling to himself as though highly pleased, for he could see how fine it was with that screen in front of them, having loopholes as it were, through which they could peep in safety.

Rob kept close to the wall of the house. From

the way in which he looked up it might be guessed that he did not mean to let any person, who chanced to glance out of a window, notice him skulking along in such a suspicious fashion, if such a thing could be avoided by ordinary prudence.

Now they had reached the corner of the structure, where the trellis and the vine stood as a barrier, shutting off all view of the rear yard and the garden, always a dreary aspect after the frost had done its work of destruction to foliage and flowers.

Both scouts quickly discovered an interstice through which they could look, and they had no fault to find from the very start. The wagon-yard was in plain sight, with the road beyond. Several empty farm wagons could be seen, also a hayrick, and doubtless the drivers of these vehicles were the noisy men in the taproom who were once more commencing to speak, as the landlord had ceased talking with the new guest outside.

It happened that there was just one car in sight at the time, and this the racing machine the scouts

had previously seen on the road at the time the Boss stopped and entered into a brief conversation with them.

Yes, there he was at the car, speaking to a couple of strangers who had been more or less jammed in the confined quarters with him. Rob saw that, as Tubby had declared, they were both dark-featured men; though he understood that so far as that went their bronzed looks might be assumed, since it is the easiest thing in the world to dye the hair, and put on a complexion to match.

At least they did look like foreigners, as American boys were apt to view strangers, so that Tubby was not to be blamed for dubbing them such. Under the circumstances, Rob gained the impression that if he had been asked off-hand to give them a name he would, without hesitation, have said they were anarchists, or something along that order, for there was a mysterious air about their movements that could not be wholly imaginary on his part.

"They're getting out, Rob!" whispered Tubby, hoarsely. "You see they *do* mean to stay overnight!"

Rob simply made a low sound not unlike the hiss of an angry serpent, but Tubby knew very well what it meant, and he therefore relapsed into silence, while straining his wide-open eyes in order not to miss a single thing that was transpiring in the wagonyard close by.

True enough, the two strangers had by now left the car, and were standing on their feet alongside the machine in which they had come to the inn. The Boss seemed to be doing something to the machinery. Rob fancied that he was removing some part which he meant to carry into the house with him, thus practically crippling the car, and rendering it utterly impossible for a thief to run away with it. Rob understood right then and there that no one is so suspicious as the thief himself.

Tubby gave his chum a vigorous knock on the leg as if to draw his attention to the fact that each of the two men had lifted a suitcase from the body of the car, which bags seemed to be unusually heavy, and contained something fragile, if one could judge from the exceeding great care with which the men handled them.

CHAPTER XIII.

SETTING THE TRAP.

When Tubby saw how the two men took such unusual pains with the suitcases they were carrying, he felt a cold chill pass up and down his spine. Though possibly no sound passed his lips his mouth certainly formed the word, and it was: "Dynamite!"

It stood to reason that if these mysterious plotters meant to destroy a part of the munition plant, their first object would be to bring about an explosion of such force that it would wreck the buildings completely. In all such dark and lawless schemes, the terrible agent employed in these modern days is dynamite, which in sticks is so easily carried, and possesses such vast destructive powers in so small a compass.

A warning pressure on his arm told Tubby that Rob would brook no whispering at that critical point. They must make good use of their eyes and forget that they had other faculties. Later

on, when in the privacy of their room, or better still, away from the inn altogether, they could discuss the important matter and decide what their next move should be.

So they stayed there, riveted to the spot, and saw the trio pass from view. Tubby did not wholly like the idea that with their coming a destructive agent had taken up its abode under the peaceful roof of that roadside inn. Doubtless, in his active imagination, he was already picturing what a mess everything would be in should some unforeseen accident befall one of those heavy suitcases. Tubby, not being accustomed in having any connection with explosives, had the utmost respect for their ability to scatter things about the premises. It is only familiarity that breeds contempt in such a case.

"Come along back, Tubby," said Rob, satisfied that nothing more was to be gained by remaining there any longer, while at the same time there must always be a chance that their actions would be noticed and commented on.

Poor Tubby could not help it if again that shiver passed over him at the moment he once

more entered the hall, knowing as he did that the conditions had changed strangely since they had recently quitted the house.

He shut his teeth hard together with a firm resolve to be brave and never under any conditions show the white feather. To himself, under his breath, he was saying rapidly the scout law with its twelve cardinal principles, and laying particular emphasis on the words: "A scout should be *loyal*, a scout should be *brave*," as if he had especial need of those qualities.

Somehow they gave Tubby a new peace. He remembered how often in the past he, in company with some of his mates, had risen to occasions and met danger without even flinching. So he grimly determined no one should suspect that his heart was fluttering wildly.

The conflict was vigorous while it lasted, but Tubby came off a victor. He realized this fact when a peace came upon his perturbed soul, and he found himself able to look the situation calmly in the face. After that there would be no sign of quailing for him; he had fought the good fight and won out.

Rob's plan was to find the others and let them know about this new and significant event. After they had been duly warned that under no conditions were they to appear suspicious, or other than rollicking boys off on a little frolic, the scout leader meant to seek out Mr. Simpson and pass the news of the latest discovery along to the Secret Service man.

"Tubby, you can do something for me," he went on to say as they stood at the foot of the stairs, after making sure that no one was in the hall or stirring above.

"As how?" immediately demanded the other, glad of a chance to see action again.

"Go and fetch Josh down with you. I'll hunt for the rest of the boys, and we can meet at that little bridge again. It's close enough by to make only a short walk, and we can feel sure that no one is spying on us while we have a little confab. Get that straight, Tubby?"

"I'm off, Rob!" came the ready response as the stout chum started up the stairs.

Rob took occasion to look into the taproom first before entering. None of the newcomers

seemed to be in sight, and he had an idea the landlord, being also absent, had gone to show them their room, which must be on the ground floor, in the new extension of the building, erected hastily after the munition plant had commenced to go up, and gave promise of additional business for the inn.

"It's just as well we came in when we did," thought Rob immediately. "That sharp-eyed Boss might have seen us standing there back of the trellis, and that would have made him suspicious. Even as it is I've got a hazy idea he doesn't know what to make of our being around this region just when things are beginning to hum. I think I can hear the boys laughing out in front, as if they might be doing something to amuse themselves scout-fashion."

Passing through the taproom without attracting any attention from the teamsters and farmers who still lingered there, warming up before continuing on their way home, Rob quickly came upon Merritt and the other two fellows.

They had indeed been wrestling, or carrying on in some boyish manner, though at sight of

Rob this ceased, and every eye was turned eagerly on him as if the trio expected he would have more news for them.

"Let's take a little walk," said Rob. "I've got something to tell you that will make your blood jump through your veins like fun. But as we go along pretend to be interested in things around you. Keep pointing to this and that object so in case we are watched it might seem we were only killing the time until supper."

Words as mysterious as these set the pulses of the three boys bounding right away. They were shrewd enough, however, to hide their intense interest, and acting on Rob's suggestion, they sauntered along the road, now and then stopping for a half minute while Andy and Sim indulged in some pretence of boxing that was well calculated to make an observer believe nothing could be on their minds beyond having a good time.

A short time later and Merritt announced that Tubby and Josh were trotting along in their wake.

"I told him to join us at the bridge over the frozen creek," remarked Rob. "No use telling the story so many times, you see; and Josh ought

to hear it as well as you fellows. The bridge is just ahead of us there, you can see, so don't get too impatient, boys."

They stopped when on the bridge and leaned over the hand-railing as though interested in seeing fish frozen in the ice below, possibly mudcats, as often happens in Jersey ponds and streams. Tubby and his companion came along shortly, though Rob noticed with satisfaction that the fat scout did not exhibit any undue signs of haste, and tried to act naturally through it all, which certainly was to his credit, the leader thought.

Feeling that the coast was clear, and that there need not be the least fear of what he meant to say being overheard by hostile ears, Rob proceeded to tell the latest bit of exciting news.

It goes without saying that he had an interested audience. Even Tubby, who already knew all about the stirring facts, hung entranced upon every word uttered by the scout leader, and this time was able to repress the same old shiver that started to creep up his spinal column again.

They stood there exchanging views for almost half an hour. Rob never scorned the opinions of

others, for frequently even the most obscure scout may have an inspiration that will eclipse the efforts of the most seasoned veteran. Besides, it is always possible to pick up a stray thought that is dropped at venture, and by careful work weave a useful plan around it.

Every now and then Rob would hint that if the boys took occasion to have a little "horse-play" it would be a good thing, in case they were being watched. Tubby entered into the spirit of the thing, and several times pretended to spar with Andy or Sim, making as energetic use of his fists as though in earnest.

All solemnly promised to be continually on their guard and act in a natural manner. There were also plans arranged calling for certain signals which the Eagles used when desiring to communicate among themselves, and words were tabooed.

"That's about all I want to say to you, boys," announced the patrol leader finally. "Merritt, you and Tubby wander back to the inn, and the rest of us will stroll in a bit later. Let it seem as though our only thought concerned the setting

of the sun, and the time that has to pass before we'll be called to supper."

Tubby was observed to sigh, as though he considered it hardly fair that six long hours should have to elapse between the "oases in the desert." But all of the others were familiar with Tubby's one great weakness, so they did not rally him on his evident dismay at learning how another full hour must stray along before anything would be doing along his favorite line.

The sun was setting in a gloriously red sky when Rob, Sim, Josh and Andy followed the other pair along the road toward the house. Tubby could be seen pointing toward the inflamed West as though drawing the attention of the corporal to the magnificent spectacle. Perhaps Tubby was also thinking that such a furiously red sight might have a dreadful significance, and was comparing it in his mind to a great conflagration following an explosion.

Once in the taproom, Rob made an interesting discovery. Apparently another couple of men had taken up their quarters in the roadside tavern, for they were sitting by the stove, and seemed

well satisfied to remain waiting for the welcome summons to supper.

So far as he could see they were just ordinary workers, such as might, with reason, find employment at the big plant close by, in some capacity that would bring them in a good wage as artisans. They noticed the five scouts, and were apparently mildly interested in the doings of the lively boys. Rob somehow imagined that these two men might be the "assistants" spoken of by Mr. Simpson, and who were to act as his co-workers in trapping the munition plant conspirators.

Rob fancied that once he caught a suggestion of a sly wink on the part of the taller man. It strengthened his conviction regarding their identity; for they must have been told about the scouts being ready to lend a helping hand, and how Rob and Tubby had indeed been instrumental in first scenting out the grave plot against preparedness.

Just then the supposed horse-trader came into the room and sat down by himself. He took out some papers and seemed to be intently examining them. Any one could see from the printed heads

that they were communications from several firms that made a business of buying and selling horses for the foreign trade. The war across the water made that line an exceedingly profitable one.

Rob was lost in wonder and admiration at finding how Mr. Simpson had fortified himself in this manner with everything needed to stamp him for just what he claimed to be. The letters were possible forgeries, but were so artfully constructed that they would easily pass muster for the genuine article, and deceive even a suspicious investigator.

Just how to get a brief interview with the supposed horse trader was a question with Rob that he had to figure out. While he was doing this it seemed as though Mr. Simpson must be something of a mind reader, and knew what he was worrying over, for what did he do but look across to where the scout leader sat, smile in a friendly way, and then beckon him plainly to join him.

The man from Washington talked loudly at first, making out that he had a boy of his own at home up-country, who wanted to become a scout,

and that consequently he felt considerable interest in scout doings. So he wanted to take advantage of the opportunity to learn something about the rules of the game.

Rob understood that the other really meant to give him a chance to communicate with him, and not arouse any suspicion. So he pretended to explain just how advantageous it was bound to be for any sort of a boy to join the scouts, and assume the responsibilities that go with the wearing of the khaki.

Few fellows were better fitted for telling in an interesting fashion the great benefits that go hand in hand with scoutcraft; and had Rob chosen to speak aloud he would doubtless have soon had quite an audience around him. This, however, was really the last thing he wanted, so he confined his remarks to occasional outbursts of assumed enthusiasm, and between-times managed to tell Mr. Simpson in whispers about the advent of the Boss and his two allies.

He found that the agent had known of the coming of the trio, though pleased to find his suspicions verified by the wide-awake patrol leader.

Rob guessed that even if Mr. Simpson had not already figured out the identity of the Boss he must be aware of his dangerous character.

"All preparations are being rapidly made to take care of the lot," he was told by the other, "so hold yourselves in readiness for the call, which may come at any time after supper. We can make good use of you and your friends, Rob. It is certainly only fair that such fine fellows should have a hand in thwarting the schemes of the enemies of our country, as they undoubtedly are. Mr. Flynn has given me some of his best men from the Bureau, and we expect to make a clean sweep of the entire bunch. Tell your chums that, and also let them know I say they are acting their part mighty cleverly for amateurs."

After that he asked a lot more questions about the scouts in a voice loud enough for others to hear, which Rob answered frankly, as though the interest shown were genuine instead of assumed.

When later on Rob strolled back to the others Tubby was looking perplexed.

"He certainly did want to know all about how we do things, Rob," he went on to say in a low

voice, "which mixes me up terribly, you see, because I understood——"

"Well forget that you understood anything right now, 'Tubby,'" Rob told him, "for as sure as you live there comes the landlord with the big bell, and it looks as if supper was on the table waiting for a hungry crowd to assemble."

CHAPTER XIV.

TIME FOR ACTION.

Tubby had not another word to say, though a heavenly smile spread over his expansive face. One would not have to be much of a mind reader to translate that expression into words, and very likely they would stand for:

“Good news, boys! Follow me!”

For as usual, Tubby led the van in the rush toward the dining room, where he could pick out his place nearest the chief dishes. Some people would call Tubby greedy, and so he was after a fashion, yet no one would give up his possessions to a chum, or even an enemy in distress, more willingly than the fat scout.

There were Merritt, Sim and Andy impatiently waiting to find out whether Tubby had been “yarning” when he told such wonderful stories about the abilities of the unknown cook in the kitchen of this obscure country tavern. No ceremony was wasted, but it was business from the

word "go." So many people had to have their needs supplied, and the landlord was there to see that no one went away from that table hungry.

Besides the scouts there were the three men who had come in the car; a travelling salesman who may have been selling goods by sample at the big works, and needed another day to get them through; a solemn looking man who had the appearance of a parson, though he rarely spoke to any one; the two men whose garments stamped them as being artisans of the better class, and last of all Mr. Chapman himself in the guise of a horse trader and purchaser.

Little talking was done except among the several groups of friends. The three men whom Rob knew to be the chief conspirators muttered now and then half under their breath, but never attempted to engage in any conversation with others. The scouts acted as boys are supposed to do when at a banquet table, with sharp appetites pressing them on to making a record.

"Didn't I tell you?" Tubby might have been heard to say triumphantly again and again as one of the newer arrivals asked for another

"helping," and attacked the same with a zeal that seemed to know no such thing as growing weary of well-doing.

In every instance the look he received in return assured Tubby that they fully agreed with what he had said when browsing of the good things that humble tavern table afforded its guests and patrons.

Rob had little to say. Truth to tell his mind was filled with serious thoughts most of the time he and his comrades were at that table. There was occasion for being thoughtful, for did he not know that close to him sat three desperate plot-
ters representing the worst of traitors, who could aim a blow at the country he, Rob, loved with heart and soul, and try to keep back the great wave of preparedness that was so necessary for the welfare of the Nation in this present world's crisis?

Besides, did he not know that among others at that table were several of the keenest agents from the Secret Service Bureau at Washington, cleverly disguised, and acting their parts with consummate skill that challenged admiration?

It was really with more or less relief that Rob arose and left the room. His signal was enough to cause Tubby and Andy, who had been trying to outdo one another in gastronomic feats, to also call a halt, and reluctantly push their chairs back. Obedience to the commands of any superior officer is one of the things a boy learns early in his career as a scout; and it is a feature of the organization that does a great deal of good in shaping the future destiny of the recruit, because it makes him amenable to discipline, something he may never have admitted before.

Once again they strolled forth for a little walk after eating such a heavy meal. Rob considered that it would be good for certain members of his patrol, since he had some fears about their being able to keep awake unless they took much needed exercise.

Then again it gave him an opportunity to say a few more things worth while, taking care not to speak too loudly while on the road. The night was dark, though not to a degree that they could stumble, with that white road to guide them.

"We mustn't go far, fellows," he told them in

the start. "I was warned that we might be called at almost any time. I've paid our reckoning to the landlord in advance so that he will not bother keeping tabs of our going and coming, as he might naturally do if we owed him for our board."

"Well, now, that was a smart trick, Rob, and I never would have thought of doing it!" declared Andy Bowles.

"It pays to keep track of the small things every time," said Merritt sagely, although inwardly conscious that he himself did not always pay as much attention to details as he should; still the consciousness of one's own shortcomings need not keep him from agreeing on general principles with a well-known maxim.

"I want to tell you a few things Mr. Simpson managed to say to me while we were making out to be talking only about the scout movement," Rob explained. "In the first place, he says he has been busy the live-long day, having reached this region early this morning, coming direct from Headquarters. He has been in touch with the manager of the munition plant, who was consid-

erably shocked to learn what a terrible plot had been formed to cripple the big industry. They have made plans so that several weak places will be heavily guarded, and it is to one of these we're likely to be assigned to do duty to-night."

"Glad to know they don't mean to leave us in the cold when it comes to doing big things," Tubby was heard to say, as though he really meant it, which was perhaps the truth, for while no "scrapper" as boys go, the fat scout had never gained the stigma of being a coward.

"Mr. Simpson has kept his finger on the pulse of events, as he called it," Rob went on to tell his eager listeners, "and I guess he knows a heap more than any of us dream. He didn't try to explain just what he's picked up, or how he went about doing it, but I want to tell you here and now I believe he's aware of the plan they mean to try, and it goes without saying that in such an event it's bound to be squashed."

"But, Rob, how are we going to get over to the works? Will we have to use Shank's mare, and trip it?" asked Tubby, as though a new source of alarm had dawned upon him, for nat-

urally one so stout could not be expected to walk with the same ease as his more slender comrades, especially after disposing of such a supper.

"Oh! that's all fixed," came the reassuring answer. "He has arranged to have us taken over in a car of some kind. Nothing escapes that sharp mind of his, Tubby. If you leave the worrying to Mr. Simpson it'll be all the better for you. He's used to clutching things, and making them go his way."

From that Rob went on to speak of other matters bearing on the part they were expected to play presently, for Rob wanted the scouts to come out of the affair with colors flying, so as to earn the high regard of the Government officers.

Josh said never a word, only listened, and wondered, and hoped that he might not be entirely overlooked in the shuffle, for so much depended on his getting that promised situation that would bring him happiness—and Susie.

"Perhaps we had better show up at the house by this time," Rob finally told the others. "We may have only an hour more to spend there, or it may be a longer time. When I give you the

signal agreed on we'll make out to be sleepy, and then troop up to the two adjoining rooms assigned to us. I've found that we can easily climb out of a certain window, and with the assistance of that trellis, reach the ground without any one knowing what we are about. The rest will be easy."

"Sounds good to me, Rob!" commented Merritt.

"But supposing now we have to put in two long hours before you get the word the car is waiting," observed Andy, "how are we ever going to pass all that time away, tell me?"

"Oh! I saw a set of dominoes and some checkers on a table in the parlor," the scout master informed him, showing that nothing really escaped his vision. "We ought to be able to have some warm games among us. Let everybody take an interest in the same, but once in a while yawn, and act sleepy. Those men may be keeping an eye on us, and hoping we will go to bed so as to be out of the way."

"I hereby challenge you to a game of checkers, Andy," said Tubby. "Last time we played you

beat me every shot, but since then I've been taking lessons from an expert, really Rob here, and I just reckon I can give you a run for your money now. Take me up on that, Andy?"

"I'm your chicken, Tubby," came the quick reply. "We'll see if things can be made more interesting than they were last time. I never care much to play with a novice; it takes half the fun away."

"Novice!" snorted Tubby. "I like that! A good many games you had to do your level best to beat me. I want to say, Andy, that I don't like your way of exchanging men, once you've managed by some streak of luck to get one ahead. It may be lawful, but it's unsportsmanlike, isn't that a fact, Rob?"

Thus talking they returned to the taproom, and from that went into the parlor of the inn where no one was allowed to smoke. Here the boys, mid laughter, settled down to amuse themselves. Some good-natured little squabbling, from time to time, arose to decide a difference of opinion as to the merits of plays.

An hour passed, and a second one was well

along. Tubby yawned often now, and his drowsiness was not altogether assumed either. All at once Rob rubbed his chin and started to softly whistle "The Wearing of the Green," which thrilled the others, for that had been the signal agreed on to indicate that the time for action had arrived.

CHAPTER XV.

TAKING FRENCH LEAVE.

The four scouts in Rob's company had all been too well drilled in mastering their emotions to exhibit any considerable degree of exultation when they thus heard the patrol leader give the "high sign."

Tubby had arranged his little programme. He knew what he should do when the chance came around. So he pushed back from the table, shaking his head at the same time as though he gave it up.

"Guess you're too much for me to tackle to-night, Andy, though I did get two games to begin with. You hadn't waked up then. I haven't been able to do much ever since that last wallop. Talk about being sleepy, why, I'll consider myself lucky if I get upstairs without dropping off into a doze."

"Let's turn in!" suggested Sim, giving a terrific yawn.

"Oh! I'm agreeable if the rest say so," admitted Andy, heaving a sigh that seemed to be indicative of his feelings.

Indeed, to judge from appearances there never could have been a more "logy" set of boys than the five who started to make their way, accompanied by Josh, toward the hall, with the idea of going to their rooms above. Yet appearances are often deceitful, as any one might have quickly ascertained after the half-dozen fellows reached the adjoining rooms they occupied. In a most miraculous fashion the drowsy feeling seemed to be dissipated, and every one showed signs of being both wakeful and alert. Rob felt certain their ruse had succeeded.

Rob might have closed the door leading from the taproom into the hall, only the landlord called out and asked him to let it remain open, probably for the purpose of allowing some of the superfluous heat to escape into the main house. Of course that would have seriously interfered with the plans of the boys had they figured on making use of the hall and its outer door in order to leave the inn, which, as we know after overhear-

ing some of their conversation, was not in Rob's mind at all.

"First of all, you fellows who belong in the other room, move along and make as if you were really going to climb under the sheets," directed the leader, softly.

"Oh! we can do that all right, Rob," chuckled Slim. "For instance, I've got a bad habit my folks have been trying to break me of for a long time back, and somehow I fall into the old rut again when I'm 'specially sleepy and grumpy."

"What trick is that, Slim?" demanded Tubby, as though he might have a talent few of his own that were deemed highly indispensable at his home, and wished to compare notes.

"It's my shoes," explained the tall man. "Seems like they weigh as heavy as lead when a fellow's dead tired, and breaking his jaws with yawning. I just have to drop them with a bang on the floor. Never bothered me any, and I don't see why the folks complain about the racket like they do."

"Well, don't be too noisy about it, and overdo the thing," warned Rob. "We'll use up five min-

utes moving about and pretending to get aboard the squeaky old beds. By that time we can start in to crawl down from the window. You want to be mighty careful not to give the game away, once we get going."

"We'll remember, Rob," said Tubby, possibly because somehow he might have thought that caution was intended especially for him—as it really was, for Rob knew the shortcomings of the fat scout only too well, and how he was liable to stumble just when it was most desirous to keep silent and move stealthily.

Accordingly, each fellow did what he could to create the impression that he was making all haste to get in bed. There was much shuffling of feet, and dropping of shoes, as well as moving about. Then windows creaked as though being partly opened before the lamps were extinguished, so that the scouts, accustomed to being in the open, could secure an abundance of fresh air during the night.

Their two apartments chanced to be almost directly over the taproom and doubtless those below would understand from all this series of sounds

that the boys were bound for dreamland by the shortest route possible. The landlord might even caution them not to do any more singing, or carry on in a way calculated to disturb his young guests, doubtless the very first fellows in khaki to ever honor his roadhouse.

When the time limit set by Rob had become exhausted, all the boys gathered in the one room where the windows stood which they had been given to understand was to witness their exit. Darkness surrounded them, and when they spoke now it had to be in low whispers. Caution was the watchword for all hands from that time forward.

Rob, as the leader, meant to be the first to attempt the task of lowering himself to the ground. He had taken the precaution to note the exact distance, separating the window from the earth, and how it would be necessary to place one's feet on the topmost strip of the grapevine trellis.

More than this, Rob had asked every fellow to take note of these things for himself, unobtrusively, of course, so that now they would have a mental map of the whole thing in their minds,

when the darkness of the night prevented them from making any practical use of their eyesight.

So far as Rob could ascertain, the trellis was in fairly decent condition, though not new. He believed it would easily sustain the weight of an average boy, though deep down in his heart Rob owned to feeling a little dread when it came to Tubby to take his turn, for Tubby was an exception to the rule, and could never be considered on a par with the rest of the fellows.

Rob, being an agile chap, had no difficulty in planting his feet on the accommodating trellis-top, and then gradually dropping to the next strip, in that way reaching the ground below.

He had no sooner accomplished his part of the feat than he listened to make sure no eavesdropper were hovering near to take note of this queer way of leaving the roadside inn. Upon being assured that the coast was clear, he gave a low signal, in common use among the Eagles, that everything was well.

Then he saw a figure launch forth, coming from the open window. He could, being directly below, even make out that it was lengthy Sim,

and so Rob felt sure there would be no trouble while the tall scout was on the way.

A minute afterwards and a pressure on his arm told the scout leader that Sim had made the drop in easy fashion. There were four more to carry out the same thing, and of two Rob had his doubts—Tubby and Josh, the latter an unknown quantity as it were, since Rob had never seen him in action, and feared lest he might be clumsy.

Next came Andy Bowles, and he, too, carried out his part of the contract in a way no one need be ashamed to acknowledge.

“Merritt says he’ll send Josh down next, then Tubby, and stay to the last himself,” was the whispered message Andy brought to the leader below.

Bob gave the signal again that the trellis was free from weight, and that another fellow had better be on the way. His heart seemed to be in his mouth when he saw that the young mechanic had actually started. Perhaps Josh, being less agile than some of the others, did manage to make more noise, but on the whole he served his part very well, and barring accident

promised to arrive in safety at the bottom where the other awaited him.

Now came the real excitement of the ordeal, for it was Tubby's turn next. With considerable anxiety Rob "chirped" to have the fat scout make the start. He even gave the signal three times as though in that way he would warn Tubby to be additionally cautious if he cared anything for the esteem of his comrades, and for the eventual success of their mission.

Well, he was coming now, for Rob could plainly see, first his head projected from the window as though he might be taking a last limited survey, and after that his feet came into view plainly outlined against the sky above.

Those below were virtually holding their breath with nervousness. Rob even took himself to task because he had not insisted on Tubby remaining in the room, or perhaps slipping out of doors at the time they were all starting upstairs, either of which plans would have relieved the tension now.

They could hear the poor trellis creak when Tubby had managed to place his full weight on

it; but at least it did not give way with a terrific crash, as Sim fully expected would be the case, and that was a little encouraging.

Now Tubby was descending. They could see his foot reaching out again and again for the second strip below, since he dared not change his hold above until that had been secured beyond the possibility of a mishap and a fall. Would he never find the resting place he sought? Back and forth that foot wavered, just missing the strip by a few inches each time. Those anxious hearts below beat like trip-hammers with direful foreboding.

"A little lower!" whispered Rob, feeling that it was better to take chances in this way than to have Tubby crash down and ruin everything, even though everything, thus far, had favored them.

Tubby must have heard the low spoken words for he immediately proceeded to do a little more stretching of his fat body; and in this manner succeeded in finding the resting place he wanted, after which he could let go above, and secure a grip with one hand on the upper strip of the trellis.

Then Rob heaved a sigh of relief. The worst seemed past, for surely Tubby would know enough to continue his downward progress until the ground was reached. But it was plainly apparent that Tubby would never have been a great success in the act of stealing forth on surreptitious night expeditions, should his folks have forbidden his joining the boys on some nocturnal raid.

There was left only Merritt, and no fear need be anticipated from that source, since he had the reputation of being an agile scout, as quick on his feet as a cat. Before Rob could give the signal after the panting Tubby was safely lodged on the ground, a farm wagon homeward bound from town stopped outside the tavern, and the chilled driver hastened to enter so as to refresh himself, as well as get warm beside the drum stove.

This necessitated a slight delay, but better that than too much haste, and possible discovery, Rob thought. He was entirely satisfied with things as far as they had gone and had no complaint to make.

Tubby was crouching beside Andy Bowles. He had managed to get his breath again and with it had come a desire to know what this usually taunting comrade thought of his recent exploit. So finding Andy's ear he breathed into it:

"Didn't make a foozle of it after all, did I? Guess you expected me to smash the old trellis down, from the way you talked up there; but she held me, and I'm not such a clumsy bear as some people think."

Andy chuckled but made no audible answer, for Rob gave a signal just then that called for silence. The driver of the farm wagon had vanished inside the taproom, but that was no reason other ears might not catch a voice that invited argument.

But there was the corporal coming down now, and in another minute they would be on their way to the place where Rob had been assured they might expect to find a car ready to take them to the munition plant.

Merritt had no trouble whatever in effecting the descent; indeed it was a most simple matter

to boys accustomed to doing all sorts of agile stunts in carrying out their scout work.

As soon as they were all united Rob led off, and they left the roadside inn behind them, with the light shining forth from the windows of the big, low-ceilinged room where that drum stove sent out such a cheery warmth.

Rob started down the road in the direction of Spencer, the others trailing along at his heels. Their eyes were gradually becoming accustomed to the darkness, and by slow degrees all of them could see better as they went on, the white road standing out plainly.

"Just ahead is where the car should be waiting for us," said Rob, presently.

"I can see the three trees plain enough," observed Merritt, "but never a sign of your fine car. I wonder if it's gone back on us?"

CHAPTER XVI.

DETAILED FOR DUTY.

"Oh! dear! do we have to foot it all the way there after all!" wheezed Tubby, as if he did not like the prospect any too much.

"Don't jump at conclusions so fast," objected Rob. "Our good friend is a man of his word, and like as not we'll find the car somewhere close by. I was given a signal to make, and we'll try that next."

Indeed, their hearts beat regularly again when immediately an answer came to the cautious whistle Rob gave, showing that some one had noted their arrival, but wanted to make sure before disclosing his presence.

The car was soon found where the chauffeur had hidden it alongside the road. He had "doused his lights" while waiting, not desiring to attract attention from any one who chanced to pass by; but as the boys tumbled into the big

touring car the man proceeded to once more light up.

With dim headlights, and a red warning lamp at the rear, they proceeded along the road. Rob had endeavored to conceal as much as possible the fact that there were so many of them aboard. Several of the boys were made to crouch down in a most uncomfortable position, and when warned of the approach of another vehicle they were supposed to huddle in as small a compass as possible.

The chauffeur had his directions from Mr. Simpson, for he did not ask Rob a single thing. It could easily be seen that he did not mean to hurry so as to attract any undue attention toward the heavily-laden car; but fairly crept along one side of the road, even allowing several cars to pass him. There need not necessarily be anything queer about such a thing as this; all sorts of sights are constantly met with in this day of the motorcar, and it is a common occurrence to see one moving slowly along like a crippled duck, some accident having happened to driving gear or tires that necessitated caution

until a repair shop was reached. Rob felt no one would suspect anything wrong.

Tubby, Andy and Merritt occupied the bottom of the car. Josh had been allowed to sit alongside the chauffeur, simply because he was not wearing khaki clothes that might attract the attention of a suspicious person.

Taking advantage of the purring sound made by the smoothly acting motor, the trio of scouts engaged in a little talk-fest as they crouched there, their heads so close together. A number of questions were burning in their minds and on the tips of their tongues. Rob did not object to this conference, though several times he gave each of them a little touch with his toe to warn them that a car was about to pass, and they had better hold up a bit.

"Merritt," Tubby said, to begin with, in his wheedling way, "I wish you'd just tell Andy here something about what this preparedness means. He's been knocking me all afternoon whenever we were by ourselves, and laughing at me because I made such a mess of it whenever I tried to explain."

"'Tain't that exactly," spoke up Andy, quickly in self-defense; "but I did say that there was a whole lot of danger about getting up a big army and navy. My father believes the same as I do, that nations are like human beings, who, when they've got pistols, are more touchy about their honor, and apt to get in a scrap. Why should the United States prepare against any enemy when we've got the ocean between us and Europe?"

"What Germany has been doing with her Zeppelins and her submarines in this war, Andy," explained the accommodating Merritt, "shows that conditions have changed very much since we used to make that boast. We're no longer isolated, and a hostile army, some men claim, could be landed on our shores in sixty days that would easily wipe out all the regulars and the National Guard Uncle Sam now has for his defense."

"But nobody really believes we'll ever be attacked," urged Andy, doubtless echoing words he had heard his pacific parent make use of.

"Neither does your father really believe his

house will ever take fire and be burned down, Andy," the corporal told him; "but all the same doesn't he take out a nice fat insurance on his property, so that in case anything *did* happen he would feel he was on the safe side? That's what preparedness is going to do for your Uncle Samuel—insure him against ruin if something does happen."

"Say, I never looked at it in that light, Merritt. I must remember that and give pop a shot the next time he talks about the folly of getting ready for possible trouble in time of peace."

"I'm astonished to hear you, a scout, say that looking ahead and making ready against a stormy day is silly," retorted Merritt. "Why, that's the rock on which all scoutcraft is founded. You'll find it on your badge, and every day you live you are taught to anticipate the coming of evil times by fortifying yourself in body and in mind. Some other time when we can talk better I'll continue this subject, Andy, and give you a few more pointers."

"Good for you, Merritt," said Tubby exultantly. "I was telling him that if he was out

walking with his sister, or another fellow's sister either, and several rough men came along and said insulting things he would give all he owned just then for some sort of weapon so he might stand up and defend her. 'That's the way with our country when weaker nations are being overrun, and their people killed like flies, and all we can do is to just talk and talk, because we haven't got any sort of standing with the warring countries. I told him Switzerland was a good specimen of a little country prepared for anything, and you notice that they're letting her alone, don't you, Andy? Think it over, and you'll see it the right way.'

Rob thought this argument had gone about far enough, considering the fact that the time and conditions were anything but suited to such talk. So he asked them to defer their interesting discussion until a more favorable opportunity, when Andy could be overwhelmed by an avalanche of clinching facts.

They had been able to see the lights of Spencer pretty much all of the way, when trees did not intervene. Rob could easily determine where they

big munition plant lay, for he had carefully taken his bearings in the daytime.

"They're working in one wing of the plant, Rob," said Sim, who on account of his long legs, and the difficulty he would experience in doubling up, had been allowed to occupy a portion of the seat beside the patrol leader.

"I see that you've also located the works, Sim," remarked Rob, evidently pleased on this account. "Yes, I suppose they have to employ a night shift of men in some of the foundry departments. I've heard that they expect to keep the entire plant working night and day just as soon as they can secure enough experienced hands. They have some enormous orders to fill for the Government and other nations as well. I was told they had secured a sixty-million-dollar contract with Russia only last week. This plant promises to be one of the biggest in the entire country."

"To think," muttered Sim, "it wasn't in existence a year ago. I tell you there's a whole lot of truth in that old saying about it being an ill wind that blows nobody good. This terrible war is fetching a lot of money to America."

Rob sighed. Young though he was, the boy had opinions of his own. He had been across on the other side of the ocean himself, and witnessed many appalling sights in Belgium and Northern France that led him to believe the march of the great German host had laid waste and ruin in their wake.

He did not attempt to explain his feelings to Sim, for that was neither the time nor the place; but Rob did promise himself that at some future hour he would open up his heart, for he believed the tall scout to be in sympathy with the thoughts that filled his own brain.

He now began to watch the chauffeur more closely, for they must be drawing near the place where the passengers in the touring car would be dropped. Rob himself did not know for certain just where the rendezvous was to be, since they were to be given a guide in the driver of the machine; but the stockade of the plant would be looming up ahead of them presently, and surely the stop must be made before they reached this danger zone, where spies might be in hiding, and armed guards be on the lookout for trespassers.

As he expected, the car came to a stand under a group of trees that overhung the road. In summer-time there would have been an agreeable shade, where teams might make a halt, and rest from the overpowering heat of the midday sun; but those branches were now leafless and bare, sighing in the night wind, and forming a delicate tracery against the starlit heavens.

"Do we get out now?" asked Rob of the chauffeur.

"I was told to drop you here," answered the man, quietly. "I have to go over to another town to fetch back some people coming from below."

Rob could give a pretty good guess that by this he meant an additional batch of Secret Service men sent from Headquarters in Washington. Evidently Mr. Simpson had considered the plot against the Government of such colossal proportions that he had sent a hurry call for more assistants, either to Mr. Wainwright, or else Mr. Flynn, the real head of the Bureau.

They had not yet started to climb down from the big car when a voice was heard close by saying:

"That you, Rob, with your mates?"

It was Mr. Simpson, the busiest man in New Jersey about that time, and one bearing the heaviest sort of load on his shoulders. Since the raiding of the munition-plant plotters had been placed in his hands, the full responsibility would rest with him. Success or failure meant a great deal to a man with a record for wonderful exploits like Caleb Simpson had won in the past. Still, he made all his moves with calm deliberation, and Rob was reminded of clock-work machinery when he considered how many things this clever man had to keep in his mind and manipulate by turns.

The car hastened away to meet an expected train from Washington. A station remote from the plant was chosen in order to easier avoid exciting suspicion.

"I want to say a few words to you boys while I have the chance," remarked the Secret Service man, softly. "I mean to conduct you to your station, and leave you there to do your part in the rounding up of the schemers."

They gathered around to listen. Often in

times to come some of those same scouts of the Eagle Patrol would like to recall that night of nights; and as surely when they did they would remember how they were thrilled by what Mr. Simpson told them in such a matter-of-fact tone as he stood in their midst under those leafless trees, with the wind making queer sighing little noises in the branches; and the heavy throb of machinery, working steadily in the plant near by, coming to their ears like the accompaniment to a song.

He used few words but made everything so plain that no one could misunderstand his directions. Although addressed particularly to Rob, as the leader of the little band of scouts, these orders were also meant for the others and were impressed on their minds with a force that gave them to understand how the enterprise on which they were now launched was no child's play, but serious work overshadowed with peril. The boys appreciated their responsibility.

"That's all I wanted to tell you, boys," Mr. Simpson finally remarked. "Now, if you'll come with me and keep as still as so many mice, I'll

station you at the important stand I've been keeping for the scouts. Do your duty as you've always had the reputation of doing in the past, and I'm sure all will be well!"

CHAPTER XVII.

BEHIND THE STOCKADE.

One thing in particular was giving Rob considerable satisfaction. This concerned the behavior of Josh, who up to this time had really been reckoned an "unknown quantity," according to algebraic rules, since there had been no opportunity for trying him out.

He was beginning to show a resolution and supply of grit that gave Rob every confidence in the world that when the time for action arrived the young mechanic was bound to be a good right bower, and could be depended on when the gale blew and the boat tugged at her anchor.

From time to time it had only been natural for the scout leader to wonder what Josh was made of. He certainly had not shown any disposition to "blow his own horn," as Andy called it; indeed, on the other hand, he had even humbly admitted that thus far in his battle of life he had not been able to make any great progress, though

striving valiantly to overcome the hoodoo that seemed to follow him persistently, just as an Arkansas "houn' dog" trails at the heels of his master.

"He's going to come out all right," Rob told himself after he had seen how Josh hovered as close to him as he could get, and was always ready to obey the slightest injunction of the leader. "Josh would have made a first-class scout when he was a boy of our age."

So Rob had this comfort at least, realizing that he had made no mistake when he figured out that the unfortunate Josh only needed a helping hand to get a start up the hill that had thus far proved too slippery for his feet.

When Mr. Simpson had left them where he wanted them to stay, Rob put all these thoughts aside, for he wished to devote his entire time and attention to the work before him.

As was his habit as a painstaking and far-seeing scout, he first of all took his bearing so that there need never be any doubt in his mind as to the location of the place at which they had been stationed.

Altogether the situation was quite enough to thrill any one, no matter how accustomed he may have become in dining with excitement. There was the long dark two-story concrete wing of the new munition plant looming up close by. Back of them stood the stockade, erected to serve as a barrier against unwelcome visitors who might possibly have sinister designs against the million-dollar plant that during the daytime was such a bee-hive of industry.

Further along lights gleamed, and the hum of industry welled up from the foundry department of the works, where the night shift of brawny men toiled during the long hours of darkness, only to desist when the day force came along to take up their work without the loss of a precious minute.

With the passage of another month or so Rob had been assured that the entire plant would be throbbing with industry day and night. A rush order from Uncle Sam, backed by unlimited capital as it was, must command every resource, as well as the best that union labor could produce. The great wave of preparedness that was sweep-

ing over the land like the boom of the incoming tide must not be delayed when the life and safety of the Nation were at stake.

Arc lights had been placed at regular intervals along the stockade, but apparently these were too few in number at present to illuminate every part of the grounds occupied by the gigantic plant. Later on this fault would no doubt be remedied when more powerful dynamos could be installed. It was peculiarly unfortunate that the original plans had not called for enough light, when in a case of this kind darkness always breeds additional danger, because of the prowlers who are quick to take advantage of the shadows.

When Mr. Simpson stationed his several groups of watchers he must have had these important facts plainly before his mind, because in every case Rob believed he had picked out a vulnerable point in order to strengthen the same.

He told the scout leader that just beside them there was a dip to the ground, and that consequently when the stockade was built a gap had been overlooked that was large enough for a man to easily crawl through.

Of course, this could easily have been filled up by the Secret Service man and his agents, but Mr. Simpson apparently had not the slightest intention of doing it. The reason was patent to far-seeing Rob, who knew that the plans of the Government officials did not merely cover a successful parrying of the planned attack but the capture of the plotters in the very act. Hence this aperture had been left just as it was in order to *invite* their attention. If it happened that the scoundrels had already mapped out their plan of campaign, nothing was to be attempted calculated to block the same. In fact, Mr. Simpson's policy was that if he only gave them sufficient rope they would hang themselves.

From where the little bunch of scouts crouched, they could see in several quarters the figures of the guards pacing their beats. They were all armed with guns, which fact in itself was highly significant since it told of constant impending peril.

To several of the boys the sight of those armed men must have brought an added thrill, since it was a new spectacle in their experience. We

chance to know that Rob and several others among the Eagles had months before been given a wonderful opportunity to visit the battlefields in Europe while the Great World War was in progress, and rival armies wrestled like huge giants for the possession of the trenches in Belgium and Northern France; so that it could not be expected that the sight of men carrying Winchester would cause them undue thrills.

Rob placed his little force with considerable shrewdness. Mr. Simpson, indeed, had seen that the patrol leader fully grasped the situation, and beyond a few general orders he really left matters in Rob's own hands. He had heard so much that was good of Rob Blake that he felt unbounded confidence in the boy's ability to "hold up his end of the log." Possibly Mr. Simpson had secret reasons to fear more for weaker points in the line, though he did not admit that fact candidly when hastening away.

Each scout was plainly told what his particular duty was to be in case any dark figure came creeping under the stockade where the land made that dip, leaving a small opening. This had been

the full intention of the plant manager to have filled with some sort of heavy mesh wire, so that while water could run off in its natural channel in case of a heavy rain, no man or animal would be able to force a passage in behind the stockade.

The rush of events must have caused this intention to slip from the overworked manager's mind; it seemed such a little thing after all, and yet as the old-time story tells us, it was the vulnerable heel of the gallant fighter Achilles that proved his eventual undoing. So this forgotten aperture under the stockade might have been the cause of a most disastrous catastrophe in connection with the expensive munition plant.

Small things must call for the same careful attention as greater ones in the lexicon of a scout. It is from tiny leakages, like that caused by a wretched little crayfish, that the enormous dikes in Holland suffer most, for if unnoticed the insignificant waste becomes gradually greater, until finally there is a mighty roar and the hungry sea bursts in upon the terrified inhabitants.

Rob noticed how the guards managed it so that

they would meet at the end of their routes, and be able to stand for perhaps a minute or two talking in low tones. He considered this bad policy indeed, and something that proved them to be poor specimens of vigilant soldiers; but then they had doubtless been recruited for the occasion, and honesty as well as a willingness to fight if called upon counted for more in the eyes of the manager than previous military experience.

"If I wanted to try and get inside that stockade," Rob mused, as he noticed this little failing on the part of the guards, "I'd take stock of their time, and do my little work cutting through when the guard of that beat was busy exchanging views with his neighbor. When he came close again I'd lie low until he had passed on. If they had an army officer in charge here there would be nothing like that allowed, that's a dead sure thing."

If any of the scouts had at some time in the immediate past wondered why those guards had been hired and placed on duty day and night, they no longer felt ignorant. The very fact that there was a deep-laid scheme on foot to injure

the plant was enough to explain the matter. Besides this, when thousands of men of all nationalities, and whose sympathies might be enlisted for the cause of the Teuton race as against the Allies, had been thus brought together there was every likelihood of some among them being desperate enough to resort to "sabotage," which means the secret crippling of machinery, so that more or less loss of time and material must result. The presence of armed guards would help to restrain the mad impulses of such reckless individuals, as well as inspire confidence in the hearts of the honest workers.

Strict orders had been given that there was to be no talking among the scouts unless Rob himself chose to ask a whispered question. Tubby, being more inclined to give utterance to his feelings than any of the others, had greater difficulty in carrying out that injunction; but he managed to do it by sternly closing his jaws, and keeping them rigid, with the muscles of his cheeks set, and his whole being grimly determined not to draw down upon his head a rebuke.

"If any unlucky move is going to bust this

game up," he kept telling himself in a most convincing and positive way, I reckon now it isn't me that's to be blamed, if I know what I'm about. Forget that you've got a tongue, Tubby Hopkins, and play the game for safety first, every time."

It was about fifteen minutes after the scouts had taken up their position close to the little gap under the stockade when they had their first real thrill. Something was moving just without the barrier, for Rob himself actually felt an object come in contact with the boards constituting the high fence.

He instantly emitted the little chirp that was to be recognized as a signal by the others, and which caused every fellow to tighten up and his muscles to become tense under the strain of expectancy.

Every one's attention was turned on the particular spot where the dip under the stockade lay. Their eyes had become so far accustomed to the half gloom of the night that they could manage to see if anything moved there. So they waited eagerly, ready to carry out their explicit instructions to the letter.

The noise coming from the foundry was too great in volume for any one to catch sounds that at another time might have been plainly audible, for cranes were squeaking as they revolved bearing buckets of molten metal, men were calling to one another, automatic hammers were throbbing as they beat a rapid tattoo, and a score of similar sounds arose from time to time to dominate the atmosphere.

Nevertheless, those waiting scouts seemed to be able to know through some wonderful sense of intuition that *something* was certainly moving just on the other side of that high barrier; yes, and that gradually it was advancing toward the dip they had been set to watch.

Every one of them was picturing a desperate plotter creeping on hands and knees toward the little gap through which he meant to wriggle his way, in order to gain the inside of the enclosure, so that he might at his leisure place the destructive bomb with which it was intended to do such tremendous damage.

When they actually glimpsed something moving under the fence the boys held their very

breath with the agony of suspense. Rob was to give the signal for action, and like a well-trained football squad on the gridiron the others were expected to hurl themselves on the intruder, muffling his attempted cries, and effecting his capture in a twinkling.

Anticipating the signal then they poised for the leap. To their amazement instead of Rob giving the low whistle they heard him chuckle. At the same moment there came a plain, unmistakable *grunt* as of surprise, that told them the ferocious would-be intruder was only a wandering hog that had suddenly sensed their presence.

CHAPTER XVIII.

WHEN TIME DRAGGED.

Well, Tubby gave a gasp, which was the nearest he dared to express his astonishment when there was such a sudden descent "from the sublime to the ridiculous," as he himself afterwards remarked when at liberty to speak of his overcharged feelings.

The hog was possibly about as much surprised as the hovering scouts. At least it hastened to turn and scamper away again. Perhaps that little hole under the fence was a favorite nightly saunter on the part of the four-footed prowler, for the men in eating their lunches doubtless threw scraps aside calculated to tempt a roaming hungry hog.

Once more the watchers settled down to their irksome task; it was hardly that though, for they had taken it upon themselves voluntarily, and work is really only that which boys are compelled to do against their wishes.

Half an hour crept past and nothing more had happened to disturb the serenity of their watch. Still, it was hardly to be expected that the nocturnal prowlers would begin operations until the night had worn further along. Guards, who started in on their patrol duties feeling fresh and wakeful, were apt to get more or less drowsy and neglectful as time went on, a fact that Rob understood, and which such sagacious schemers must also be aware of, he felt sure.

All of a sudden there arose a clamor. They heard a man shrieking at the top of his lungs, and then a score of heavy voices took it up so that for the moment it almost seemed as if Bedlam had broken loose.

The scouts were both mystified and chagrined. They crouched there close together and listened. All that racket came from the part of the plant where work was being carried on day and night; and the first thing that struck some of the fellows was that after all the bolt had fallen in the bustling foundry department, and hence far removed from their particular post.

Keen disappointment was fast taking hold

upon them. At the same time some of the boys were holding their very breath in anticipation of hearing a fearful detonation occur, though the seconds ran into minutes, and nothing of the kind happened, which just mystified them more than ever.

By degrees the shouting grew less in volume, though occasionally they could detect a penetrating sound that might be the cry of one in agony.

Rob guessed the answer to the puzzle first, and knowing that the others must be overpowered with natural curiosity he believed it to be his duty to enlighten them. It would be only for a minute or so at most, and surely his low whispers were not likely to be overheard by any prowler outside the barricade, while all that noise kept up over at the foundry.

"Some poor fellow met with a bad accident, I reckon!" he remarked, softly.

"Guess you're right, Rob!" muttered Merritt, who could instantly see how, by a misstep, a man might manage to spill some of that molten metal upon his feet and lower extremities, causing the

most intense agony, and forcing him to cry out as they had heard some one doing.

"Yes, that must have been what happened," Andy Bowles admitted, for like a good many other fellows Andy was clever at seeing things *after* they had been first of all discovered by a brighter mind, just as those envious courtiers at the throne of King Ferdinand of Spain declared Columbus had not done anything so *very* wonderful in discovering America, since all he had to do was to just keep on steering straight into the west until he came to land.

Strange to say all of them, even Tubby Hopkins, seemed to experience a sense of relief at learning this undeniable fact. It told them that the game had not been played through without giving them a chance to take a hand in it. They had feared that the sudden commotion in the foundry meant the blow had fallen there, or at least an attempt been made, which on being frustrated, would complete the night's business.

"Listen," said Rob, impressively, while the others clustered around him, all as eager as ever, and every heart throbbing with sturdy resolu-

tion, "even this happening may turn to our advantage after all, don't you see?"

"How so, Rob?" Sim asked, knowing that some one had to show the curiosity that was welling up in all their hearts.

"If they had been figuring on making use of some other opening in the stockade that lay over there closer to the foundry, all that row would tend to discourage them, and bring about a change in their plans. So you see it would be apt to send them this way. Our chances are better than they were before."

Again the others recognized the fact that their leader spoke of undeniable facts when he made this assertion. None of them felt any great amount of surprise, simply because they were in the habit of expecting Rob to arrive at conclusions in advance of their best efforts.

"No more talking now, boys," ordered the patrol leader. "Get back in your positions and take up the job again where we dropped it. Another time we may not be fooled by a stray porker, or an accident to a foundryman."

"That's so," muttered Andy, "three times is

the magical number. In baseball it means you've struck out, and with us it may——"

"Let up that grumbling, can't you, Andy?" warned Merritt, as they crept back to their positions again.

By now things had settled down to the same old steady grind. The cranes once more took up their complaining as they were manipulated so as to lift and carry the heavy buckets of molten metal that glittered with a white heat, and threw off sparks as it ran from the tilted receptacle into the various moulds; the men called to one another as they toiled in the intense heat; the automatic trip-hammers beat with a riotous tattoo while settling the rivets in place; and there was all the confusing noise that invariably accompanies rush work in a bustling foundry and machine shop.

Once more time took up its monotonous grind, the seconds seeming to be minutes, and these in turn half hours, to the impatient and eager lads waiting for a chance to show their colors.

Tubby began to lapse into his more normal state of existence, which meant that he felt him-

self getting slightly drowsy. This thing of keeping constantly "on edge" was very exhausting, he thought; it seemed to use up an enormous amount of vital energy, and kept a fellow constantly perspiring under the impression that at any second he was to be called upon to act with every ounce of strength and energy.

So Tubby amused himself by yawning, which was such an old habit with him that no one paid the least attention until presently in making one of those extensive "gaps" he managed to accompany it with a sound that caused Andy, cuddled down alongside, to give him a sharp punch in the ribs, which was intended to warn the fat scout he had been going much too far.

While Rob kept himself watchful every second of the time, he could not help allowing his thoughts to fly back to other scenes in his stormy past where he could remember finding himself face to face with emergencies equal to the one he was just then wrestling with.

These might be far down on the arid deserts of Mexico; away out in California; or even across the ocean on the war-stricken fields of Belgium

and France, for Rob Blake had passed through a most varied experience for one so young as many of our readers will agree.

Something connected with the present strained situation, it must have been, that brought about a revival of these memories in the boy's mind—the glow from the foundry where the molten metal flowed, and electric lights burned brightly; the hum of industry so like the grumble of distant heavy guns battering the trenches a mile or so away; and perhaps the constant expectation of a sudden emergency arising that would demand action on his part—all these set Rob's pulses throbbing, and kept him keyed up to a pitch of intense excitement.

Tubby was now vexing himself by wondering what time of night it must be. If one could judge from his feelings they must have been on guard for many long hours, and morning would be coming before a great while. But then Tubby having been a scout so long, and versed in the reading of the heavenly bodies, knew that this was a wrong way of looking at it. The stars had not changed so tremendously, for one planet he

knew to be Venus was only then hovering above the western horizon.

Tubby found a new way to keep awake. He began to cudgel his brains trying to remember at about what time Venus was rated to set on those winter nights. When a fellow has a few facts like that in hand he need never despair of being able to tell the time of night, as long as the sky is clear, since there is a clock set in the heavens that never needs winding up, and can always be relied upon to give the exact time.

"Somewhere around eleven, I feel pretty sure it is," Tubby was telling himself after mature reflection. "Yes, and the longer I think of it the more certain I feel that's right. Huh! have we been here only two hours all told? Gee whiz! it seems more like eight to me. It's sure getting to be chilly, let me tell you, Tubby Hopkins. I hope something comes along before a great while. I don't see how we can stand to be on duty here all night."

As for Rob and Merritt, both of them felt sure the time was rapidly approaching when they might look for a change in the programme of

inactivity. As midnight drew on apace, there was bound to be something doing, unless the whole plan of campaign had, for unknown reasons, been abandoned by the munition plant plotters.

Then a wave of newly aroused interest passed through each one of the six patient watchers. Plainly had they heard a sneeze, and without the slightest doubt the sound had come from the other side of the stockade!

It did not seem probable that any one connected with the big plant would be moving around outside the fence, and hence the presence of some stranger menaced the safety of the valuable buildings.

As on the former occasion, when the false alarm turned out to be a harmless hog, the boys and Josh prepared themselves for eventualities. Since hogs are not given to sneezing, that is, as far as any of the boys knew, they felt certain this would not turn out to be a repetition of the old trouble.

Stationed so as to command the little "dip," and in a position to hurl themselves on a recum-

bent form the second Rob gave the prearranged signal, there was really little for them to do but wait for the passage of events.

Yes, something was moving outside the barrier, for a plain thump came to their strained hearing as though a foot had struck against the fence. Tubby felt like shaking hands with himself. He was so glad the dreadful monotony was about to be brought to an end. No matter what might happen, anything must be a relief from the awful grind of crouching there in the cold, unable to do more than shiver until one's teeth threatened to rattle like so many Spanish castanets in the hands of a bolero dancer.

Tubby had been trying to bolster up his courage and forget his unhappy condition by drawing mental pictures of a nice warm room at the inn, with the fire blazing on the broad hearth, and a late supper on the table awaiting their attention, provided by the grateful Mr. Simpson in recognition of their valuable assistance in rounding up the mysterious rascals.

One good turn and that dream might become an actual reality, he determined, as he clamped his

teeth firmly together, and even forgot to shiver. A warm flush seemed to pass over his whole body. Whoever it might turn out to be the invader was even then commencing to worm his way under the fence, and in the course of another minute, perhaps even less than that, his chums would be able to try out their mass formation wedge upon the unknown prowler.

CHAPTER XIX.

POUNCING ON AN INTRUDER.

Under ordinary conditions Rob and his chums would not have considered that they were doing anything remarkable in hurling themselves upon a creeping spy who would be totally unaware of their presence. Six to one made the odds heavy in their favor, and really to boast of having accomplished such a feat would be showing an undue sense of elation.

There was one thing, however, that made this an experience different from anything connected with their past. This lay in the fact that the unknown spy was expected to be carrying with him some sort of explosive, with which he intended to do serious damage to the munition plant.

It is always a risky thing to handle such dangerous objects as bombs and dynamite, since there is more or less chance that an explosion

may happen when least designed. Even a violent concussion is apt to start something off, much to the disadvantage of those concerned to say the least.

Rob had been warned of this by Mr. Simpson. It was not anticipated that any of the evil men engaged in this plot would be ready to play the part of martyrs, and destroy themselves rather than submit to capture; but then accidents might happen, and the result prove just as serious all around.

Accordingly, Rob had cautioned the others. They were to exercise the utmost care not to strike with any violence, depending wholly on their ability to crush the enemy down on the ground, and almost suffocate him by sheer force of numbers.

Another thing they bore in mind, and this was the possibility of there being a second or even a third creeper coming along in the wake of the leader. It was to their advantage then that very little noise should be made when effecting the capture of the first person, so as not to alarm his allies. Mr. Simpson was anxious to bag the

whole lot, and a half-way victory would in a measure be a disappointment to the Secret Service man.

As the seconds passed and nothing appeared in view, some of them began to fear it had only been another false alarm. Perhaps one of the guards had on some account been sent outside the barricade, and it had been him sneezing the boys had heard.

But stay, there was surely a slight movement down in the shallow ditch through which water was wont to pass whenever it rained, or the snow melted. Then hope revived once more in the breasts of the listeners. The lurker meant to try to gain the interior of the stockade by means of that gap under the fence; he would be making another start presently, which would land him on their side.

Not a head or hand was moving now, every fellow lying as flat on his stomach as possible, the better to remain unseen. They depended more or less upon their ears to tell them when the intruder had passed the line of fence so that he had arrived on their side. Then Rob would

be giving the eagerly anticipated signal and they would hurl forward; after which it would be all up with Mr. Sneak.

Josh had been given a post of honor, for Rob builded more or less on the fact that the husky young mechanic was a full-grown man and capable of exercising more energy than the best of the scouts. He meant that Josh should vie with himself in pouncing on the victim.

Well, the creeper seemed to be bent on coming along, for once again they heard him moving softly. It seemed to Tubby that he even caught what was a low chuckle, though the noise from the works broke out afresh, and he could not be quite certain of this. Besides, it was hardly likely, he considered, that a desperate ruffian of the type they expected to run across would bother himself with exulting because he found what he considered a weakness in the defences of the munition plant.

It was all right, for he certainly must have passed under the fence by now, Tubby told himself. The little dip gradually lessened in depth as it receded from the stockade, so that any one

“snailing” along the sluice was bound to rise higher all the time.

The plans of Rob, however, called for speedy action. He did not mean to give the creeper any more chance to discover their presence there alongside the shallow ditch than could possibly be avoided.

When the signal sounded every fellow got in motion as though connected by some invisible bond, and an electric button had been touched that started them going simultaneously.

There was an upheaval all along the line, and then down upon the recumbent figure in the trench came six lively bodies. No wonder only a groan arose, for with all that mass converging so as to suppress him, the unknown man did not have the slightest chance to give utterance to anything more.

That, too, was a part of Rob’s carefully laid plan. He did not mean that the leading spirit in the night raid should be given an opportunity to raise an alarm that would frighten others away. The victory would be shorn of much of its value if it had to be limited to the capture of

only one man, who might not turn out to be the master spirit of the conspiracy.

Tubby managed to do his little share in the good work, for he was resolved not to be at all backward. He settled upon what turned out to be the lower extremities of the creeper, which no doubt was a lucky thing for that individual, since had all that avoirdupois landed upon his head or chest the result would have been doubly painful.

Once Tubby sat down he was not to be moved by any ordinary effort. Those who had had experience along that line always declared that Tubby could make himself weigh half a ton when he chose to exert his entire powers, and rivet himself in position.

Rob on his part was at the head of the prisoner. For reasons of his own he wanted to be in position to choke off any attempt at calling out, should the other be able to give vent to a cry. Merritt, too, was there, grasping for the neck of the victim, while Sim, Andy and Josh had managed to distribute themselves at intervals along the man's body.

Perhaps it was the sudden way in which his

downfall was brought about that had contributed to keeping the other silent. 'Then again he may have had no breath with which to do any shouting, for the shock of having six lively fellows land upon him while lying there prostrate must have driven every atom of wind from his lungs.

Andy and Josh had their orders, and seeing that the first-comer had been effectually dealt with, they now slipped from his body and turned to face the stockade. Should a second enemy appear it was to be their duty to gobble him up before he could take the alarm and draw back again after the manner of a tortoise upon scenting danger.

All this went through with machine-like regularity, and there was not the least blunder in judgment made by any one of those involved. Afterwards, in reviewing their work of that night, Rob and his chums could congratulate themselves on account of the splendid record they had made, for it was certainly something of which any scout might feel proud.

Rob waited a brief time to make sure there was no one following close on the heels of the

first desperate intruder. When he began to believe that such was not going to be the case, his next thought was to secure the one prisoner they had taken, remove him to a place of safety, and then set the trap again in hopes of another streak of luck.

Mr. Simpson had given something into Rob's charge and the patrol leader believed it would come in handy in order to secure the prisoner with. At the same time he could catch a glimpse of the man's face, and tell whether they had been fortunate enough to pounce upon that masterful leader, or simply upon one of his tools.

It was a small edition of a vest pocket electric torch that Rob now produced, and as his thumb pressed the button this emitted quite a fair little shaft of light. Rob held it down so that the little glow might not attract the attention of a vigilant guard and lead to troublesome questions, perhaps an unnecessary alarm.

"Let me take a look at him, Merritt," he whispered, at which the other moved part of his obstructing arm.

One glance and Rob uttered a low cry of

amazement that struck the others as most mystifying. The gleam of light had revealed an amazing fact to the scout leader and the corporal, but since it was now shut off Tubby and the others did not know what to make of it all, though they could readily understand there had been a shock of some kind.

"What is it, Rob?" whispered the fat scout from his position at the feet of the prisoner, and at the same time he craned his neck forward in the effort to see.

"Turn that light on again, won't you, Rob?" pleaded Andy, who with Josh had already backed up, feeling that there was something going on in which they might be interested.

Rob did as requested, for he meant the others to understand the nature of the strange thing that had come about; particularly did he wish Josh to see. As he had anticipated there arose various low cries of surprise, while Josh gasped:

"Gosh! if it ain't Susie's own dad, Mr. Beare, a-creepin' in here like a reg'lar bomb-thrower. Say, am I seein' right, boys, or is it only a dream?"

CHAPTER XX.

PUTTING IN A WORD FOR JOSH.

Tubby was so astounded that he almost fell over. Like Josh he began to wonder if he might not be dreaming, for it seemed the height of absurdity to discover in the mysterious intruder, whom they suspected of coming to damage the plant, the father-in-law of Josh himself, for Beare had confessed to have invested a part of his own capital in that sprawling series of bustling workshops.

As for Bob, he admitted feeling a peculiar numbness creeping over him as he endeavored to clutch at something that offered to explain the conditions. Again he bent over the recumbent figure of the prisoner. They had managed to shut off most of his wind, but his eyes were staring and wide open, so Mr. Beare must undoubtedly have recognized the boys, and especially Josh, whose exclamation would be apt to reveal his identity.

He was trying the best he could to make facial movements and grimaces that told Rob he wanted a chance to explain something. Besides, he looked as though he would be apt to get black in the face with the choking he was receiving at Merritt's willing hands, and accordingly Rob thought best to give him the opportunity he craved.

"Ease up for a bit, Merritt," he accordingly told the other.

"You don't think he'll try to give the alarm, Rob?" asked the corporal, not wholly willing to trust the gentleman; for when any one takes to creeping under stockades of a guarded munition plant, and close to midnight at that, it certainly has a decidedly suspicious look that needs a lot of explaining to free the culprit of blame.

"No danger I'm almost certain," Rob told him.

Merritt was under orders and had to obey, no matter what his own private opinion might be. He felt sure that Rob knew his ground when he thus commanded him to relieve the pressure he was steadily exerting on the throat of the lurker.

Mr. Beare began to suck in breath again in

greedy gulps. Until he had filled his hungry lungs several times he would be in no condition to talk. Rob could be patient and wait. As for the others, they crowded around and anticipated all sorts of strange confessions.

Fortunately nothing had been done thus far to attract the attention of the patrolling guards. Rob hoped this good luck would continue to the end of the chapter, for if once any of the munition plant defenders took a notion to stroll that way bent on investigating, they might as well say good-bye to any hope of intercepting other interlopers.

But the mystery of Mr. Beare's appearance still remained; and not even the wildest guess was able to solve it. Tubby, finally convinced that he was actually seeing things in the flesh, and not having a nightmare from sleeping on his back, immediately jumped to the conclusion that the rich farmer must have gone out of his mind, and was actually irresponsible. He fancied that the other, having much of his means invested in the new works, had worried persistently with regard to the possible destruction of them, with

the result that he actually started to play the part of a marauder when his mind gave way.

Some of the others were not even disposed to be as lenient in their criticism. There was Andy who built up an airy structure in which Mr. Beare took the part of a villain of the deepest dye, who, while pretending to be an honest tiller of the soil, and a pillar of the church on Sundays, in reality roamed the country at night time holding up travelers and relieving them of their worldly goods.

And while each and every scout was busily weaving some strange theory of his own to account for this amazing discovery, the object of so much attention managed so far to recover his breath as to emit a few gasping words.

"Well, I guess—I lost the wager—after all, worse luck; but who would ever think you boys would be hanging around—ready to jump on me?"

Rob heard these words with a sudden gleam of light dawning upon his puzzled mind. They gave him the first inkling of the possible truth, for he saw that the other was really in no condi-

tion to display any degree of ingenuity in framing up plausible excuses. At such a crisis as this the blunt truth was much more likely to burst out. Mr. Beare's mind was still in too much of a whirl after being so rudely jarred by his experience with the six who sat upon him so suddenly to be able to construct a story out of thin air.

"The surprise is mutual, sir," said Rob, grimly. "We were looking for a desperate conspirator to drop in on us, and not a gentleman like you. According to what Josh Whittlesby here, your son-in-law, has told us about your steady habits, we certainly never dreamed of seeing you come crawling in under that stockade in its weak place."

The prostrate man drew in a long breath.

"I was mistaken after all," he said, half grumblingly. "I banked on my knowledge of things in the past, and said I could find a way to enter the works without being detected. But I didn't bargain to run up against a bunch of Boy Scouts, which unexpected meeting has proved my undoing."

Then to the surprise of some of the boys the

man began to chuckle as though, after all, the odd happening might have its comical side, as well as a serious one.

"Please go on," said Rob, in his persuasive tones, "and tell us more about your reason for undertaking this remarkable adventure, sir; and also, if you please, keep your voice as low as possible, for we do not wish to have any of the vigilant guards come this way. It would interfere with our plans, you see, sir."

"Oh! since I've made a failure of the thing," confessed Mr. Beare, "I don't mind explaining it to you. In fact, there is nothing else for me to do if I want to escape being taken for a skulking rascal. It was a wager, that's all, boy, a silly wager that I made."

"With whom, Mr. Beare?"

"Mr. Harrigan, another heavy stockholder of this company," he was told without any hesitation. "You see, we got to talking over the precautions that had been taken to guard the works, knowing as we did that other places had been mysteriously injured by desperate scoundrels, hired perhaps with foreign gold to injure the

making of munitions in America, and some of whom are even now in the clutches of the law."

"Yes, we understand you so far," said Rob, encouragingly, as the other paused in order to catch his breath, for he was still panting somewhat.

If anything, all the other heads were bent a little closer. Not for worlds would Tubby, Merritt, Sim and Andy have lost a single word. As for Josh, he was holding his very breath with keen interest.

"We differed in our opinions as to the value of the guards who had been employed," continued Mr. Beare. "He believed that they were an able lot of men, capable of doing the duty for which they had been engaged, and guarding the entire works against attack. I was ready to vow that there must be many weak places where a smart rascal could manage to get inside the stockade, and accomplish his crooked work. In the end Mr. Harrigan laughingly dared me to put my theory to the test and try to get past the stockade. He thought he would force me to knuckle down, and admit that I was wrong, but

it happened that he was barking up the wrong tree."

Again he paused to get a good breath, and then went on with his interesting explanation.

"You see, boy, when I was much younger I used to be quite a woodsman. I spent some years in a logging camp, and even trapped for furs several winters, so that I was a pretty good hand at all the tricks for which the American Indian used to be famous in the old days of Daniel Boone and the pioneers. When Dave Harrigan gave me the dare with one of his taunting laughs I guessed that perhaps the old man hadn't quite forgotten how to creep up on feeding game, or sneak close to a suspicious campfire in order to see who his neighbors were before he showed his hand. So that is why I took his dare—and it looks like I've lost my wager, thanks to you scouts."

"Well, we're sorry for that, Mr. Beare," said Rob, hardly knowing whether to laugh at the strange explanation or look at it soberly, though the gentleman seemed serious enough; "but don't you think you are pretty rash to undertake any-

thing like this? One of the guards might have opened fire on you without giving you an opportunity to explain."

"Oh! I took the chances of that," said the other, with a touch of the reckless spirit that may have been a part of his nature in younger days. "Besides, you see I happened to know that strict orders had been issued to every guard not to fire his gun until he had challenged—and I had the countersign!"

The more Rob heard of the wager the stronger grew his inclination to accept the other's frank explanation as being the actual truth. He would never have believed such a thing possible, and the idea of the rather stout Mr. Beare trying to play the part of a spy was almost ludicrous; but doubtless he had vanity enough to really believe all his former cleverness along those lines had not yet deserted him. At any rate, carried away by the sudden heat of an argument he had laid the wager, trying diligently to meet its severe conditions when betrayed by his puffing as he crawled along in the "dip" under the stockade.

Several times while he was making these ex-

planations Rob noticed that Susie's stubborn father turned toward the spot where Josh crouched. Now, the young mechanic had not as yet uttered a word, being quite stupefied by the amazing event that had taken place. Still, some intuition must have told Mr. Beare that his despised son-in-law was close by him. Rob had even purposely mentioned Josh's name a short time previously, and in such fashion that it could be understood the recent unlucky one was a member of their company in good standing.

Rob was already beginning to wonder what they should do with their prisoner. To keep him as such would reveal his foolish wager with another director of the company, and might subject the rich gentleman to considerable annoyance, not to mention possible ridicule.

Always quick to see a chance to do another good turn, Rob immediately determined to have Josh profit through the misfortunes of his obdurate father-in-law. The scout leader did not see any reason why advantage should not be taken of Mr. Beare's adversity to build up the fortunes of Josh, whose hour had apparently arrived.

"While, sir," he began to say, hesitatingly, "none of us disbelieve your explanation, still it is so remarkable that we hardly know just what to do about it. In one way I ought to turn you over to the officer of the munition plant guard and let him deal with you as he would with any suspicious person."

As Rob expected his words created a near-panic in the breast of the other. When it was too late Mr. Beare began to see his foolish action in its true light. Although the gentleman with whom he had laid the wager might come to his rescue, nevertheless the situation was bound to be awkward for him, and require all sorts of explanations.

"Oh! I hope you will not decide that it is absolutely necessary to do that, boy!" he exclaimed, in a louder voice than Rob liked to hear.

"Speak softly, sir!" warned the scout leader, sternly.

"I would be willing to make any sort of promise you asked of me if only you could see your way clear to forget the strange circumstances under which you have just discovered me. I was

certainly a fool, and I realize it now. I should never hear the end of it from my associates. I am afraid that with the coming of age and the addition of so much flesh my former skill at doing woodcraft stunts has gone back on me. I really believe you Boy Scouts have picked up the knowledge of Indian ways where I dropped it years ago. I hope you will decide to call it quits, and allow me either to crawl out of here the way I came in, or better yet let me stay with you, and assist in any work that may lie ahead as, frankly, I would like to do."

Then Rob saw his chance. He had been waiting for Mr. Beare to humble himself sufficiently to spring his little mine.

"I don't know whether it would be doing the right thing or not, sir," he went on to say, softly, "but I am tempted to take you at your word and give you another chance to make good."

"Thank you for saying that, boy," the other continued, with a sigh of relief as though his predicament might be taking on a more awkward look with each passing minute.

"But there are conditions attached to the offer

to overlook this suspicious fact on the part of a director of this plant," continued Rob.

"Name them, and I guess I can meet any ordinary conditions," Mr. Beare told him, eagerly. "I deserve to suffer on account of my foolhardiness, and punishment will help to teach me a much needed lesson."

"First of all, then, sir, you must give me your solemn promise that you will stay here with us while we are on guard, and help us if we are given a chance later on in the night to catch a real conspirator in the act of creeping under this weak place in the stockade."

"Oh! I gladly agree to do all that, and thank you, Rob—I remember you told me that was your name. Is there another condition besides?" uneasily.

"Yes, and I hope you will be as sensible in deciding to accept in that case as well," replied the scout master, positively, "otherwise I fear I shall really be compelled to turn you over to the guard and let things take their natural course."

Mr. Beare seemed to consider. Perhaps he may have had a suspicion of the nature of the de-

mand that Rob was about to make upon him next.

“Now tell me what the other thing is you ask me to do,” he finally requested.

“Make up with our friend Josh here, and give him a chance to show you that he is able and willing to work his fingers to the bone for Susie!” said Rob.

CHAPTER XXI.

A VICTIM AT LAST.

It was a strange place in which to barter, and Rob afterwards wondered how he had dared take it upon himself to consider these side issues when he should have kept the main object constantly before his mind. But he felt so keenly for Josh, and the opportunity to do something for the honest fellow came so suddenly, that he found it impossible not to take advantage of the situation.

A silence followed his startling announcement. Mr. Beare was evidently swallowing hard, as though he could not get the awkward bite down. His pride stood in the way of his showing a generous spirit, but Rob had him at a decided disadvantage. He must either agree to the conditions or else suffer the consequences, which loomed up more and more gloomily with every passing second.

“You’re taking advantage of my being placed in a humiliating position to push the fortunes

of that—well, my never-do-well son-in-law,” he complained.

“Well, sir, everything, they say, is fair in love and in war; Josh, we have discovered is a clean, honest fellow, who has never had more than half a chance. He’s bound to get it at last, and through your big company here, because only for him your property might have been wrecked. He has already been as good as promised a permanent and paying position in the plant as a reward of his valuable services.”

Rob purposely “spread it on pretty thick,” and Josh himself was surprised to learn what a wonderful thing he had done when chancing to repeat to Rob the brief conversation he happened to overhear between that pair of unknown men.

Mr. Beare considered. What Rob told him had more influence in causing him to alter his mind with regard to Josh than anything that had ever happened. Josh, doing well and respected, was quite a different person from Josh out of a position, and followed by the spirit of bad luck that had so long haunted his footsteps.

“I’m afraid I’ll have to accept the conditions,

boy," he said, "though it's a hard thing to swallow."

"I don't see it in that light, sir," retorted Rob. "Josh is honest and capable, and he is everything in the world to your daughter. If I were in your boots, Mr. Beare, I'd make up my mind it couldn't be helped, and that I'd turn around and show these young people I could be as generous as well as a just man. Here's Josh only too willing to call bygones off, and commence all over again. Won't you shake hands with him, Mr. Beare, and stand by him in his new life?"

No one was attempting to hold the late prisoner down now, and so he was at liberty to rise to his knees, though Rob would not let him go any further for fear of discovery.

"Well, as we used to say when I was a young man," he remarked, with a short nervous laugh, "you've got me where the hair is short, Rob, and I suppose there's nothing for me to do but knuckle down. Besides, I suppose it will really make the girl happy. She seems bound to have him in spite of all my objections. So, Josh, here's my hand on it. I never go half-way in anything

as you know. After this I'll see that you get all the chance you want to support your wife."

"That's all I ask, Mr. Beare," said Josh, somewhat awed by the rapid rise his fortunes had taken, and hardly knowing whether he were awake or dreaming.

"And now," declared Rob, suddenly realizing that they had been taking a great risk of being noticed by some near-by guard, "let's stop talking, and settle down to watch once more. It's a good thing those armed sentries have been doing most of their looking on the outside of the stockade, or they would have 'got on' to us before this. So back to your old positions, boys, and the orders I gave you before still hold good. Mr. Beare, please stick beside Josh, as I am making him responsible for your good behavior at present."

The gentleman gave a little grunt as though he hardly knew whether to like such an arrangement or not; but on the whole he concluded that what could not be cured must be endured. So he accompanied his son-in-law to where he meant to lie down, and there they crouched in

company. Rob was laughing silently to himself at the success that had followed his suddenly arranged little plot. Remembering what a feud there had lately existed between Josh and Mr. Beare, he could not help comparing them to the lion and the lamb lying down together, as it will be when those longed-for days of universal peace visit this earth of ours.

Ah was quiet again, and they could only hear the same sounds that had erstwhile greeted their ears—the noises coming from the busy foundry and machine shops, the calls of the guards walking their respective beats, and the chugging of a locomotive engaged in shunting a long train of loaded cars upon the sidings close to the vast plant.

Rob felt he ought to be satisfied with what had come about during that little period of excitement. It was true that they had not succeeded in bagging one of the desperate squad of conspirators, nevertheless the scout leader had the assurance of knowing his followers were capable of doing their work well. They had "tried it out on the dog," and hence were better prepared

than ever to baffle any attempt of the enemy to damage the works.

Josh and Mr. Beare were doing a little whispering over at their location. Rob was inclined to "call them down" at first, but then he expected it would quickly subside; and it really did him good to know that the gentleman was willing to ask questions of the son-in-law whom he had until recently despised so heartily.

As Rob anticipated, the whispering soon stopped. Mr. Beare had learned certain things he was anxious to know, and could lie there thinking over the remarkable vicissitudes of fortune. To be actually indebted to Josh for favors bestowed caused him to wonder if he might not have been too hard on the poor chap in the past. Well, "all's well that end's well," he decided.

Rob put that part of his labors out of his mind. He felt that Josh's path was likely to be one of roses from henceforth, and that no need existed for considering him any further.

One thing at least seemed evident, which was that if thus far they had not been given an opportunity to do any business, none of those who were

lying in wait at other weak places in the barricade had had any better luck. So far as Rob was able to tell there had been no sign of an alarm in any quarter.

Plenty of excitement had come their way, if they could count the prowling hog and Mr. Beare with his ridiculous wager under that head. Rob wondered if they would be treated to another surprise, and what shape it might take.

Time passed and another half hour crept along with leaden feet—at least that was what Tubby termed its passage, for despite the recent excitement which had stirred him up at the time he was feeling drowsy again.

Rob had taken up his position close to the stockade; indeed, profiting by past experiences he kept his ear as near the high fence as possible. It seemed to serve as a pretty fair carrier of sounds, especially when it happened that anything came in contact with the heavy boards of which the stockade was built.

He did not hear anything, though it seemed to be impressed upon his mind that once more something was moving on the other side of the

barrier, and that a hand perhaps had been feeling along the fence just beyond where he crouched.

So positive did Rob feel that this was so he even gave the low signal which his chums knew called for additional caution, as something significant had occurred.

Once again Tubby had the delightful experience of feeling that chill race up and down his spinal column. Would he ever forget it in times to come? He believed that he might never again hear a locomotive puff, or the throb of a trip-hammer beat upon the air without again seeing that stockade under the shadow of the munition plant, and in imagination watch for a moving form to come creeping along a shallow dip in the ground.

Still, if given the chance to desert his patient comrades and seek a place of safety, Tubby would have indignantly declined to take the first backward step. He was not a "quitter," whatever else could be said of him; clumsy he might be, indeed he never professed to be agile like his more slender companions, but the name of coward had

never been bestowed upon the fat chum in all his life.

They had had two false alarms, and Tubby hoped there might be virtue in numbers, with the third chance being the lucky one. So he tried to hold his breath as long as he could, and wait until Rob gave the signal.

The scout master had already decided that once again an object of some kind was starting to enter under the fence. He could not see plainly enough to make sure of its character, though he found himself secretly hoping it could not be that determined old hog again, bent on securing those scraps from the men's lunch.

Yes, he could notice a movement of some kind there now, though not daring to turn his head so as to obtain a better view. Until a certain point had been reached that would make escape simply impossible, Rob did not mean to start anything in the way of action.

The success they had met with in the case of Mr. Beare encouraged him to believe they might be equally fortunate in handling the next comer, for the necessity of squelching his efforts at

shouting out was just as compelling as before.

Finally Rob saw that the moment had arrived. There was no use of waiting any longer, since the moving figure in the dip was just where the scout leader wanted him to be.

Accordingly Rob gave the signal, and then immediately dropped over the edge of the diminutive gully. He fell exactly where he had planned, and without wasting a precious second of time proceeded to crush down the man's feet so that he could have no use for them.

Merritt and Andy had also done their part, which was to muffle the fellow's head and prevent his giving any outcry so as to raise an alarm, and in that way frighten off any of his fellow conspirators who might be lurking near by.

When Tubby dropped there was a plain grunt heard, and no wonder, with all that mountain of flesh coming down with such a jolt. Then Sim Jeffords, Josh and even Mr. Beare were also trying to have a share in holding the unknown man down. Possibly the latter gentleman may have been dimly wondering whether his rival in the wager, the other director of the company,

could have ventured upon the task of finding entrance to the stockade just as he had tried.

At least Rob felt that they were carrying out their little scheme successfully, because their object had been attained without any unnecessary noise.

"Stand by there, no crowding, Tubby!" he whispered. "Get off his body, and give him a decent chance to breathe. We want to show a live prisoner, and not a poor fellow crushed into jelly. Andy, Merritt, how is it up to your end of the line?"

"Fine and dandy. We've got him fixed so he can't give tongue, if that's what you mean, Rob," came the immediate reply from the corporal, whose office gave him the undoubted right of assuming charge, next to Rob himself.

"Then let's take a look at our prize before we start in to tie him up," suggested the patrol leader, leaving to Josh the task of stringing on the man's legs while he took out his little pocket flash-light and crept over to where the others were stationed.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE GROUND IN COMMAND.

"Oat what great luck!" gasped Tubby, who, being overcome by curiosity had twisted his fat body around so as to catch a glimpse of the face of the man on whom they were sitting.

Rob manipulated the little hand-saw with more or less dexterity, and managed to play his gentle game upon the countenance of the hair-shirted player. The man was in such desperate straits, with Merrin half choking him in order to make sure of his utter silence, that perhaps he did not look his best. Nevertheless, those of the crowd who had seen him before, being as we know Tubby and Rob, found no difficulty in recognizing him.

It was the same looking man with the marvellous dark face whom they knew as the "Dion," first described by Josh after hearing that eventful conversation between the two strangers.

Fortune had indeed been very kind to the

scouts, since they seemed to have captured the leading spirit in the scheme to injure the munition plant that was making Uncle Sam's war material for defense.

Rob felt more than satisfied. All that weary waiting, and everything else that he and his chums had been compelled to endure, was now cancelled by this glorious victory. He felt sure Mr. Simpson would be greatly rejoiced when he learned what had fallen to the share of the lads he trusted so utterly.

At the same time Rob understood how there might be "many a slip between the cup and the lip." They had surprised one of the plotters, and made him a prisoner, but there were undoubtedly others, either waiting to come in at the same break in the stockade, or to try other weak places. Then again such a thing as losing their victim might be the miserable portion of the boys unless they exercised considerable skill in handling the case.

Rob was grimly determined that nothing along that order should happen while he had the running of matters. The very first thing to be done,

he realized, was to relieve that threatening pressure on the wretched man's throat, since they did not wish to have him die on their hands.

Even for this was Rob ready. His system of looking ahead and anticipating events and needs worked wonderfully well. Preparedness had always been a cardinal principle with him, and this campaign upon which the scouts, as well as Uncle Sam in Washington, had entered, appeared to be right in his line of thought and deed.

So out of his pocket he took a nicely arranged bandage which could be used to cover the mouth of the prisoner. This was calculated to muffle his voice should he try to call out in order to warn his allies, or else bring them hurrying to the rescue.

He started to place his bandage around the man's jaws. Merritt and Andy comprehended what his main object must be, and accordingly assisted him as much as possible.

As for the prisoner himself, at the moment he was hardly in a condition to more than feebly object at this—by slight movements rather than by any sound escaping from his throat.

Rob, having attained his object, and made sure that everything was secure, his next move was to tie the man's hands behind him at the wrists. To do this they first of all rolled him partly over, drawing both arms backward. Evidently he knew what the object of this move was for again he strove, in a feeble way, to protest, but lacking sufficient energy and strength to struggle against three pair of hands he found it impossible to keep from being tied up.

This was all that seemed necessary, for there did not appear to be one chance in a hundred that the man could either get away from them or call out, unless he were a wizard, and Rob had little belief in such magic.

While engaged in this little task, Rob was looking ahead and planning what to do. They did not feel any necessity for keeping the prisoner with them as they continued to watch that little gap under the high stockade, for it was likely to be hours before the breaking of dawn relieved them in their self-imposed vigil.

The trap ought to be again set. There was no telling what number of victims it was to catch.

Things sometimes happen in "cycles," as Rob had often heard people say, when explaining why they expected to have two more articles broken at home after one had fallen to the floor; so also he had noticed that when one accident takes place on a certain railroad several others follow.

He wanted to be ready in case that "rule" held good with regard to a plurality of creepers in their small ditch. The boys were up to their elbows in business now, being in good practice, since they had carried out their massed tactics of play on two separate occasions; and they would be ready for a third, if fortune favored them.

The scout leader remembered that Mr. Simpson had shown him where he had his temporary office or headquarters. It was in a small building off from the main works, possibly designed for the storage of certain valuable assets of the company later on, although just then unoccupied.

Coming as he did from Washington, with letters from leading men in the Government service, Mr. Simpson had undoubtedly been well received by the manager of the munition plant.

The thrilling news he brought also must have deeply impressed that sagacious, long-headed individual with a sense of the importance of the agent's mission. If a terrible plot had been hatched, looking to the demolition of the million-dollar plant, no preventive measures could be too prompt and comprehensive to suit him.

Accordingly he had been given a free hand to do just what he wished while laying his plans to surprise and baffle the conspirators. Doubtless the manager himself never once thought of going to his bed that entire night, but would be found somewhere in the vicinity of that office, counting the minutes of darkness, and hoping that the break of dawn would find his valuable property still unscathed.

It was to this headquarters, then, that Rob meant to take his prisoner. Better to hand the slippery customer over to the charge of men accustomed to deal with such desperate cases than try to keep him there, and run the risk of losing him.

Not wishing to take any chances by going on this errand alone, Rob decided that a couple of

his chums better accompany the prisoner and himself. Tubby was out of the question on account of his lack of agility in case a sudden emergency arose; while Merritt, being the second in command, ought to stay on duty so as to run things during his, Rob's, absence.

That left only Sim and Andy, both serviceable scouts, and well suited for the duty to which Rob meant to detail them. There was Josh and Mr. Beare ready to render any assistance necessary in case Merritt found himself called on to "surround" another interloper, so the temporary absence of three might not work havoc to the plan they had arranged.

"I want you to go with me, Sim, and you too, Andy," he thereupon remarked, always taking care to soften his voice so that what he said might not pass beyond the barrier, and be heard by any one chancing to be close at hand.

Sim and Andy understood what was in the wind. They seemed to guess it must have a connection with the prisoner, who was to be conducted to some guardhouse, in order to insure his safety under any conditions.

"All right, Rob, count on us," whispered Andy, while Sim started to crawl around in order to come up on the left side of the scout master. Quickly but quietly this was done.

"Help me get him on his feet," whispered Rob. "Keep a tight grip so there'll be no chance for him to break away. Merritt, take charge here, and have another of the ugly batch on his back when we come back. Get that?"

"It won't be our fault if we don't," chirped Tubby, evidently full of ambition to duplicate their previous successful performance.

The man was helped to rise. Rob was a little afraid that he might absolutely refuse to move a foot, being bent on obstructing their plans as much as possible. Had that happened the determined scout master would have ordered him carried if there was no other way of getting him into the presence of Mr. Simpson.

Greatly to his relief, however, he found that while the man might be feeling considerably depressed and ugly, his state of mind did not tempt him to go to such foolish extremes. Perhaps he already realized that he was in the hands of fel-

lows who were not inclined to put up with any nonsense, and that such resistance was only to procure him further rough handling.

When Rob, together with his pair of assistants and the prisoner between them, started off, they left the others strung out along the ground in pretty much the same positions that had been occupied before; except that Merritt took the place of the scout leader.

The man walked feebly, so that Andy and Sim felt compelled to support him on either side. This may have been genuine weakness on his part, since he could hardly expect to gain anything by feigning a condition of that sort. All the same Rob considered it the part of wisdom not to neglect a single precaution, and walking along close by he kept his attention much of the time on the dark figures beside him.

The guards had their routes along by the stockade, or else on the flat roofs of the various buildings of the new plant. The danger which they had been placed on duty to discover was all expected to come from without, and consequently they paid very little attention to what

might be going on inside the stockade, or within the walls of the bustling foundry.

Knowing this fact, Rob anticipated having a fairly clear field to the little building occupied by the Government agent as a sort of headquarters, where his men could from time to time bring him information connected with their movements.

It chanced to be at some little distance from the place where the scouts held the fort at the gap under the high board fence. Rob went a little out of his way so as to avoid certain spots where the light from the foundry fell. He did not wish any one to see himself and little company if it could be avoided. Workmen were likely to be hurrying back and forth, bent on various errands connected with their labors; and if they suddenly saw three boys in khaki uniforms escorting a man who had his mouth swathed in a muffling bandage, and his hands tied behind his back, all sorts of alarming rumors might get afloat, and a near-panic take place among the already nervous foundrymen and machinists.

It was in little matters like this that Rob Blake

often showed his good sense. Some fellows of his age, overcome with a sense of their own importance after making such a brilliant capture, would have been only too delighted to parade their prisoner before the assembled hundreds of workers, and even boast of how they had added glory to the name of the Boy Scout organization. Rob was built along entirely different lines. He was not only modest and retiring but thoughtful as well.

They finally succeeded in making their way to the office, and Rob was pleased to see a little gleam of light shining under the pulled-down shade at the small window, from which fact he entertained hopes of finding Mr. Simpson on deck.

CHAPTER XXIII.

"WELL DONE, SCOUTS!"

Coming thus to the door of the little building, Rob suddenly determined to step in unattended, and then spring a surprise upon the gentleman after he had him keyed up to a pitch of expectancy.

Accordingly he knocked, and a voice immediately called out:

"Come!"

It was Mr. Simpson who sat inside the small building, and he seemed to be quite alone. He arched his eyebrows and looked somewhat surprised at seeing the scout master, but immediately smiled.

"What can I do for you, Rob?" he asked, under the impression that the other had come to ask some favor—perhaps he and his chums were tired of maintaining so long and unprofitable a watch, and wished to be relieved from further duty.

Mr. Simpson must have remembered that they were only boys, and could not reasonably be expected to stand the strain like his experienced men. He would have to detail a couple of his subordinates to guard the gap under the stockade where the boys were on duty, because he deemed that a very important post. If necessary he himself could take on the task during the rest of the night of threatening peril.

"I've come to make a little report to you, sir," said Rob, quietly, and yet with the ghost of a smile hovering about the corners of his firm mouth, which, had Mr. Simpson only detected it, might have warned him that there was something unusual in the wind.

"Have you seen or heard anything unusual at your post?" he asked.

"Yes, sir, we've had a few alarms," Rob told him. "The first was when a big hungry sow started to crawl under the fence so as to hunt around for scraps thrown away by the workmen when eating their lunch."

That caused Mr. Simpson to chuckle a little as he went on to say:

"You didn't go to the bother of trying to make a prisoner of a hog, I suppose? We are after two-footed rogues, not those possessing four legs, eh, Rob?"

"We had no chance," replied the scout, "because as soon as the animal discovered us lying there and watching him it gave a startled grunt and rushed away, and although that happened some hours ago, none of us have seen anything of the beast since."

"But you spoke of alarms, and from your using the plural I take it that you met with another surprise, Rob?"

"Yes, sir, we did," Mr. Simpson was told. "We have a young fellow with us, you remember, by the name of Josh Whittlesby. He ran away with the only child of a prosperous farmer, one Mr. A. W. Beare, who it appears has quite an investment in this plant, and is also one of the directors, I understand. It seems that he fell into an argument with another director concerning the care with which the works were being guarded. Mr. Beare didn't think very much of the men on duty. He declared that it would be

an easy thing for any half-way clever rogue to gain admittance to the stockade. The argument got so heated that finally a wager was made between the two men, and Mr. Beare decided to prove his ideas true by himself undertaking to gain admittance unbeknown to a single guard."

Mr. Simpson gave utterance to an exclamation.

"Mr. Beare must either have been a fool, or else he knew what he was doing in taking those desperate chances," he remarked, hastily.

"Oh, he was fairly well fitted to make the attempt, for in his younger days he used to be a woodsman, though he's got so stout, and puffs so much when exerting himself now, that we could plainly hear him coming."

"Then he chanced to pick out your identical post to try his experiment, did he?" demanded the Government man, looking quite tickled. "Well, I wager he made a bad botch of the business with such vigilant scouts on duty. What happened to our good friend Mr. Beare, Rob?"

"Oh! we just sat down on him!" replied the patrol leader. "But you can understand, sir,

that we were surprised ourselves when we found out who our prisoner was. He explained it to us as soon as he could get his breath. You see, he has taken his daughter from Josh because up to now the poor fellow could not seem to hold a place long enough to support a wife. But it's been all fixed; so it was a good thing in some ways we happened to be on hand to welcome the gentleman to the stockade."

"Then he's lost that wager of his, Rob?"

"Oh! surely, sir," the scout leader affirmed, "but that needn't worry him, for he can well afford to pay the bill. Besides, he has been forced into a condition where he had to shake hands with his son-in-law, and cry quits, which is going to make Susie very happy. But Mr. Simpson, that wasn't all!"

"What! did you have a third visitor?" cried the gentleman, looking still more pleased, and from the fact that he rubbed his hands together it was apparent that he already scented important news.

"Yes, sir, and we also succeeded in making a prisoner of the next one as well," declared Rob.

"Don't tell me it was that other foolish director, starting out to see for himself how well the stockade was guarded?" asked Mr. Simpson.

"Why, no, sir, it didn't turn out that way, though some of us had a suspicion it might. When we came to take a look at the man we were sitting on and choking, making use of that dandy little light you loaned me, we were surprised and also pleased to find that we had bagged big game! In fact, Mr. Simpson, he turned out to be the fellow we know as the 'Boss.'"

"Good for you, Rob; this is great news you're fetching me. Where is he now?"

"Right outside, sir, in charge of two of the boys, with his hands tied behind his back, and a gag across his mouth to keep him from giving any alarm."

Mr. Simpson simply reached out and seizing Rob's hand squeezed it unmercifully. His face fairly glowed with satisfaction, as well as pride in the manly-looking lad before him.

"I'm glad I've had the chance of making the acquaintance of such a clever number of boys,"

he remarked, warmly. "Mr. Wainwright was telling me a few of the things you've done in the past. At the time I rather imagined he might be drawing the long bow, but now I believe every word of all he said about you—yes, and much more. You're surely a wonder, Rob Blake."

"Shall I have him brought in, sir?" asked the boy, wishing to turn the conversation in another channel, as he always did when any one started showering praises on his head.

"Yes, without delay, if you please," returned the other. "I am anxious to discover who this leader of the conspirators can be, though I have my suspicions."

Thus authorized, Rob stepped to the door, opened it, and waved his hand. A stir outside followed, and then Sim and Andy appeared escorting the prisoner into the lighted office.

"So, it's you, is it, Michael Wicklow?" exclaimed the officer of the Secret Service as the bandage was deftly removed by Rob, allowing the prisoner a chance to breathe freely again, and speak also, if he wished. "Well, I'm not surprised. I've had you in my mind much of



"So, its you, is it, Michael Wicklow?" exclaimed the officer of the Secret Service.—Page 268

late, and this daring plot would be one after your heart, for you are reckoned the most reckless character on our list of suspects. But whose chestnuts are you trying to pull out of the fire now? Do you get your pay in foreign gold, or is this a scheme of simple blackmail, such as some others you've engineered in your shady past?"

The dark-faced man with the glittering eyes smiled disdainfully.

"I'm not saying a word, Mr. Simpson, about who my employers are. You'll never find that out, no matter what happens to me. I'm provided for if I outlive my sentence; and I suppose there's no escape from that. I was caught in the act."

Mr. Simpson turned to Rob again.

"Have you searched him?" he asked.

"Yes, but did not deprive him of any of his load, which I thought you would like to find on his person, sir," came the reply.

"Rob, it seems to me you think of *everything!*" declared the gentleman, filled with genuine admiration.

So he proceeded to search the prisoner, and

was not long in extracting two queer-looking articles from deep pockets where they had been carefully secreted, and well protected against premature explosion by rough contact with exterior objects.

"These are bombs, and as well-built specimens as I ever saw!" declared Mr. Simpson, showing the scouts the long fuses by means of which the explosion was expected to occur after the plotters had been given plenty of time to make their escape from the vicinity.

"They look pretty small to blow up a big plant like this, I should think," observed Andy, with a touch of skepticism in his manner.

"I have no doubt but that they contain sufficient of the most terrible explosive known to modern chemistry to do damage here," Mr. Simpson hastened to explain, as he laid the pair of deadly missiles carefully upon a shelf where they would be secure against accident. "Besides, they were to be so placed that the shock of their discharge would start other disastrous sympathetic explosions, and then fire would add to the terror of the occasion. So you can under-

stand, boys, what a fine thing you have accomplished through your surprising vigilance. The company will be very grateful, and you can have granted almost any favor you want."

"We never bother ourselves about thinking of a reward, Mr. Simpson," said Rob. "In this case all we shall ask is that our friend Josh be given a contract on a paying job that will permit him to claim his wife. Now that we've handed our prisoner over to you to take care of, we mean to go back to our duty. For all we know there may be another rat in the trap by this time."

"I can very easily see, boys," said the gentleman, warmly, "that you have an exalted comprehension of what that word duty means. I want to say again that after what I have seen of your work my ideas concerning Boy Scout energies are going to be lifted to a more elevated plane. If I had half a dozen boys of my own every one of them should be coaxed, and ordered if necessary, to attach themselves to a troop down in Washington without the least delay. As I've been known to look on the movement a little sus-

piciously up to now, that is as high praise as any person could be expected to utter."

He shook hands with each one of them in turn, after which Rob and his two chums withdrew, wholly pleased, and satisfied with what they had accomplished.

Nothing now remained for them to do, it seemed, but to make their way back to where they had left the others, and once more resume work at the old stand. While the night held sway there would be more or less peril hanging over the threatened munition plant, and consequently every one guarding the works must remain awake and on the alert.

It seemed, however, that the surprises of that wonderful night were not yet exhausted, for while on their way back to where they had left the others, Rob, Sim and Andy met with still another astonishing experience, and one that really capped the climax, even when taken in connection with the remarkable events that had already occurred.

CHAPTER XXIV.

A STUNNING ANNOUNCEMENT.

"I'm glad we're well rid of him, Rob," Andy was saying as the trio walked past one of the now darkened buildings that in the daytime would be throbbing with life. "It's like shifting the load on to Mr. Simpson's shoulders; but he will know just what to do with—what did he call that head man—Michael Wicklow, wasn't it?"

"Sounds kind of Irish to me," suggested Sim, reflectively.

"There was a slight trace of brogue to his speech, too," observed Rob, "and I wouldn't be at all surprised if he did come from the Old Green Isle. A lot of these adventurers you meet with around the world, doing all sorts of great stunts that call for bravery and recklessness, are Irish."

"Yes," Andy went on to say, "and now plenty of them over here in America are dead set

against the Allies, all because they hate England so much. Why, I've heard more than one man say he'd like to enlist in the German army just to get a chance to hit at the English."

"If there has been any foreign money back of this plot against the munition factory," said Sim, "as most of us believe, we can guess where it comes from. But Mr. Simpson, being in the Government employ, isn't going to compromise himself by saying what he thinks right down in his heart. Rob, whatever do you suppose that queer noise is we can hear once in just so often when the racket from the foundry dies down?"

"If you asked me, now," broke in Andy, "I'd say it seemed to come from overhead, though that's impossible."

Rob had thrown back his head as though tempted to look up toward the dark cloudy space above when suddenly the three boys saw a blinding flash at some little distance ahead, and inside the enclosure back of the stockade. Their breath was taken away, and the concussion of air that accompanied a deafening detonation

actually threw Andy flat on his back, while both of the others found more or less difficulty in maintaining an erect position.

It was only natural that all of them should feel a wild spasm of sudden alarm pass through their hearts when this happened. It had occurred without the least warning, and as all during their long vigil the boys had been constantly anticipating some such explosion, the fact of its arrival filled them with awe.

All of them remained rigid for a brief space of time. No doubt they fully expected that other explosions might follow swiftly upon the heels of that first one, perhaps in the munition works, where powder was employed as well as other still more dangerous ingredients in making the material of war.

When a quarter of a minute passed away without any other shock they began to breathe freely once more. Andy even clambered to his feet, quivering as though he had been seized with an attack of the ague or "shakes."

"Rob, what happened?" he cried, as usual falling back on the scout leader, just as though the

other could explain better than either of his chums.

"All we know is that there was an explosion," came the quick reply. "Just what caused it, and the amount of damage done, are facts we may learn only when we come to look into the thing. I'm glad it didn't happen anywhere near where we left the other fellows."

"That's surely some comfort, Rob!" added Sim in a trembling voice. "That was a fierce jolt, let me tell you. I wonder now did another of those scoundrels get inside the stockade somewhere, and manage to do his dirty work?"

"But didn't you notice, Andy," complained Sim, "that the thing went off right in the open court away from the buildings? I forgot that you keeled over, and in that way couldn't see as well as Rob and myself did. I've got a hunch now that an accident happened to some chap who was toting a bomb across that open place; and a premature explosion came off."

"Which would be a bad job for him, then, I should say!" cried Andy.

"Listen to the crowd of workingmen shout-

ing as they come pouring out of the foundry, will you?" exclaimed Sim. "They think that row must have meant a wing of the plant was going skyward, and that their turn may come next. Whew! hear them whoop it up, will you, boys?"

"Indeed, the scene was one of great excitement by this time. Several hundred brawny workers thronged the open spaces, running this way and that, and calling at the top of their hoarse voices. A shrill siren located somewhere on the roof started to add its powerful whistle to the other sounds. The heavy clang of hammers had suddenly ceased, and even the chug of machinery no longer remained in evidence, as the alarmed workers had managed to turn the power off before taking flight from workbench, lathe and sand mould.

"Let's go ahead a bit and see what really happened," suggested Rob, making up his mind that in all probability there was not going to be another explosion following close on the heels of the one that had just wrought such havoc. Andy and Sim trotted along at his heels. They might

have hesitated to take such a bold step if left to their own judgment, but since Rob considered it safe to go forward it was not for a subordinate to demur.

Others were also pushing in the same direction. Not all of those sturdy toilers could be thrown into a panic simply because of a sudden crash, and the jingle of much broken glass in the windows of the silent factory building closest to the spot. Some of them knew no such word as fear; indeed a coward really has no business accepting work in a munition plant, since there is constantly more or less danger that something dreadful may occur calculated to try the nerves, perhaps bring the workers to the brink of deadly peril.

When the three lads reached the spot they found as many as a dozen curious men looking with something akin to awe at a great hole that had been torn in the court. Undoubtedly some sort of explosive had spent its force there when, without any question, it had been intended to do its fell work upon one of the valuable buildings, filled with costly machinery, as well as partly

completed missiles needed for the defense of a great Nation against possible foreign foes.

"Great Scott! what a hole!" exclaimed Andy, as they, too, fell to gazing into the gaping aperture with more or less interest.

"Rob, I pity the poor wretch who was carrying that bomb when it went off," remarked Sim. "Why, there wouldn't be as much as an ounce of him left around here, I'm thinking," and with the words he began peering to the right and to the left as though dreading lest he make a gruesome discovery, yet impelled by some resistless if morbid impulse to continue searching all the same.

Rob began looking around on his own account, but unlike Sim he was not anticipating finding anything that might pertain to the remains of the unfortunate plotter. A sudden idea flashed through the mind of the young scout master. It dazzled him at first, and he could hardly believe there would prove to be any truth in the suggestion; but nevertheless he felt impelled to try and make sure. That accounted for his searching so industriously.

Several of the men watched them as though dimly wondering who the boys in khaki might be, and how they came there inside the stockade of the munition works. Rob paid little heed to any such unimportant side issue as this. When engaged upon serious matters he made it a point never to allow his attention to be distracted from the main point.

Watching, the others saw him bend down and make use of his small hand torch. It looked as though Rob might have made some sort of discovery, for he came hastening back toward them.

Mr. Simpson was seen rushing up. He had been assisting the alarmed manager, endeavoring to hustle the seething mob back to their work again, assuring them that it was not a matter of great importance. Unable to stay away longer, and desirous of ascertaining the real cause of the loud detonation, the Government agent had now arrived on the scene.

He even jumped down into the aperture as though bent on finding out anything he could that would give him the clue he wanted connected with the strange explosion.

"I bet you he's looking for pieces, too!" Sim was heard to exclaim, as though he had thus far seen no reason to modify his belief to the effect that the wretched carrier of that bomb must have been scattered all over the immediate vicinity.

"There's Rob gone to speak with him," remarked Andy. "Now mark what I say, Sim, if any one can tell about what this thing means it's our chum. He gets on to facts and explanations the quickest of anybody I ever knew."

"Yes," Sim went on to say, "and there he is plucking at Mr. Simpson's sleeve right now, and I can tell by the way he acts that Rob knows something he thinks the other ought to hear."

"Gee whiliker! but you've got me guessing hard, Sim. I wonder what it was Rob picked up over yonder? He seemed to consider it worth keeping because I distinctly saw him ram the same down in his pocket."

"Well, it might have been a part of the bomb that exploded here," suggested the lanky scout, sagaciously.

"They're coming this way right now, mind

you!" exclaimed Andy. "I only hope that if Rob means to tell what he figures it out to be, he'll let us into the secret, and not send us along to where Merritt and Tubby are keeping watch. Whee! I bet you they're all worked up to fever heat by this time, and yet they can't well leave their post any more than could Casabianca, the boy who stood on the burning deck whence all but him had fled."

Rob, accompanied by Mr. Simpson, headed directly for the spot where the other pair of eager scouts stood. Perhaps the leader may have seen the anxious pleading expression on the faces of both Sim and Andy, for he smiled as he went on to say:

"Come along, fellows, back to the office. I've got a few words to say to Mr. Simpson, which you ought to hear too."

That was what they were hoping would happen. The two immediately fell in step, and gladly went along. The men still hung around that terrible gap in the ground that told of released force capable of seriously damaging the buildings had the explosion happened in almost

any other spot than it did. Some of them would be loath to return immediately to their work; in fact, for the rest of that particular night the force would be considerably weakened in efficiency, as well as in numbers.

All the way back to the little office they passed among clusters of laborers excitedly talking matters over. The manager and others were going around telling the men that there was actually nothing to be feared; and whenever he had a chance Mr. Simpson added his words of assurance to the others.

"Here we are, and come in, boys!" the agent presently remarked as he passed inside the small building given over to his use as headquarters.

He was looking expectantly toward Rob the next minute, as though certain words which the scout leader had already spoken may have aroused a hope in his mind that the deep mystery surrounding that strange explosion was about to be speedily solved.

"Mr. Simpson," began Rob, gravely, "you'll find some difficulty at first blush in believing what I'm going to tell you, but I give you my word

of honor that it is the positive truth. Here is a fragment of the bomb that exploded on contact with the frozen ground in that court. You can see that it was undoubtedly much larger than the one we took from the prisoner, and of an altogether different pattern. In fact, I don't believe they were made or handled by the same parties. This seems to be pretty much the same kind of a bomb they are using over on the other side to drop on English towns, or fortified places. Mr. Simpson, hold your breath, for I am going to assure you that this was certainly dropped in the courtyard of this very plant from an airship, or an aeroplane—from a considerable height!"

CHAPTER XXV.

THE LONG NIGHT VIGIL ENDS.

No one said a single word immediately after Rob Blake made this astounding assertion. His proposition was so thrilling that even the veteran Mr. Simpson stood there staring at him; while as for Andy and Sim, they looked as though in a trance.

Rob held out the fragment of bomb which he had luckily managed to pick up.

"Take it, Mr. Simpson, and see for yourself," he said, with a positive conviction in his voice that carried great weight. "Besides, there is still further evidence along the line I am traveling, and my chums will bear me out in it, too."

"Please let me hear anything, Rob," the gentleman remarked, as he eagerly accepted the ragged bit of metal that was offered to him. "You have chilled my heart to the core. I might even think you were trying to have some fun at my expense if I did not know that you were such

a serious lad. If what you tell me turns out to be true it seems high time that the Government begin to take stock of every one in this wide country who owns an aeroplane, or a dirigible balloon. Either such is in the hands of a bitter and unscrupulous enemy to the United States, or else a madman has it in his possession."

"Just before the explosion occurred, sir," began Rob, "one of my chums asked me what the singular noise could be that sounded like the propeller of a launch running at full speed, and which seemed to come from overhead, though Andy here said that was impossible."

"Just what I did!" chimed in the individual in question, hastily, and then once more relapsed into silence, willing that Rob should have the floor to himself.

"I had started to look toward the cloudy heavens at the second," continued the scout leader, "and I can say positively that I seemed to catch a glimpse of something moving away up above. It all happened quickly, and then came that fierce crash, so that even now I find myself unable to say just what it was; but it was moving swiftly

toward the southwest, and as far as I could see, it resembled an aeroplane."

"You ought to know the looks of such machines, Rob," asserted Sim, "because when you were across the water you saw scores of the same flying over the rival armies in Belgium and Northern France. Wow! to think that it's already come to such a pass that they're beginning to drop bombs down on our munition plants. Why, what with all the queer things that are going on everywhere I sure think Uncle Sam is as good as in the war up to his neck right now, without any formal declaration being given."

Mr. Simpson caught at one point.

"You said the machine you saw was heading in a *southwest* direction, didn't you, Rob?" he asked, hurriedly.

"Yes, I'm sure of that, sir," the scout leader told him.

"I want to remember that then, for we'll have to scour every rod of country in that region clear over to the Delaware. Whoever ran that machine must have either been heading for his secret hangar at the time or else he came direct

from it. Unless the mystery of that aeroplane dropping bombs is cleared up, there will be no safety for this busy plant from this time on."

Mr. Simpson was evidently in deadly earnest. His face looked grave, and he had lines of deep thought across his forehead, as though he realized the immensity of the proposition confronting him.

"You won't mind if I keep this fragment of a bomb, will you, Rob?" he asked.

"Certainly not, sir," replied the other, "only I would like to have it back again after it has served your purpose, for such a thing is always an interesting reminder of a scout's business. Every time I handle it I shall see all that's happened on this wonderful night."

"I promise you to return it in good time, Rob," said the Government agent. "Luckily I had sent the prisoner away before the explosion occurred to be locked up in a stoutly barred room, and I suppose he is caged there now. I will make it a point of visiting him without delay, in hopes that he may be able to give me some information concerning that mysterious aeroplane. That man

may even be crazy, and on that account doubly dangerous."

Rob did not stay any longer. He saw that Mr. Simpson was anxious to be doing certain things that were pressing on his mind.

"We will go over to our post now, sir," he went on to say, edging toward the door of the little office, "and round out the night on guard duty. But I've got a hunch that this explosion business will end any further attempt on the part of the conspirators to get inside the stockade."

"My opinion exactly, Rob, although we cannot take any chances, and must continue to be just as vigilant to the break of dawn. But with their leader a prisoner I imagine the gang will break up, for they will be constantly in fear that he may be forced to confess and implicate his confederates. That does not worry me one-half as much as this strange aeroplane affair, because with that man at liberty there can be no absolute safety for the munition plant. Please do not say a word about what you suspect, boys. If it were known I am afraid there would fol-

low a panic among the workers, and the Government might be held up in the important rush orders that may mean everything to patriotic Americans in this hour of National peril."

"We give you our word of honor, sir, not to mention a single thing until after the mystery is cleared up," said Rob. "But if to-morrow you happen to get a clue pointing to the guilty one we would be mightily obliged if you let us in on the game when you go to round the man up."

"I heartily promise you that much, boys," came the reply. "You certainly deserve that ten times over for the plucky and clever work you have done in the name of preparedness. You can depend on me remembering. Good-night again to all of you."

So once more the trio of scouts headed toward the spot where they had left Merritt, Tubby, Josh, and his pa-in-law on guard. The excitement had not yet begun to die out, for new workers were continually arriving at the place where that mysterious explosion had occurred to survey the gaping hole in the ground, and exchange all manner

of comments concerning the probable explanation.

From the remarks which the boys caught in passing it seemed to be the consensus of opinion that some spy must have succeeded in eluding the vigilance of the men guarding the plant, doubtless meaning to damage the buildings; but that by a premature explosion of the bomb he carried he had been overtaken with a sudden fate. It also seemed that no one felt the least pity for the wretch, who deserved all that had come to him.

When the three scouts reached the place where their comrades were on guard they found an excited lot awaiting their return. Tubby was fairly wild to learn what had made all that terrible noise; for the flash accompanying the explosion had not only startled the watchers by the stockade but thoroughly alarmed them as well.

Rob meant that they should know about the strange thing that had come to pass; but remembering the promise given to Mr. Simpson he first of all bound them to absolute secrecy.

"You must not say a single word to any one until I give permission," he told them, "and Tubby as well as Merritt will be put on their honor as scouts, while Josh must promise, ditto Mr. Beare."

After they had each held up a hand, and given their word, Rob went on to tell how he had surprised Mr. Simpson by asserting his belief that the explosion had resulted from a bomb coming in contact with the frozen earth inside the stockade, which in turn had been let fall from an aeroplane passing over head at a considerable distance.

In the midst of his little story Tubby interrupted him.

"Why, Rob, we heard that queer rattling sound, too, and Merritt here will bear me out that I even said it made me think of an airship, but I believed it must come from some machine in the works close by. What d'ye think of that, now, Merritt, it sure was an aeroplane after all, and Rob even saw it, while it never occurred to me to twist my neck and look up."

All of them were amazed at the audacity of

the unknown aviator who had attempted to emulate the dashing exploits of those of his class across in the war-stricken countries of Europe. They naturally began to offer all sorts of suggestions in hopes of being able to reach what seemed a promising solution to the mystery. Tubby even hit upon the idea that Mr. Simpson had mentioned, which Rob considered quite a bright feat for Tubby.

"I wouldn't be much surprised," was what the fat chum said slowly, as though the brilliant idea was being evolved in his brain just at that instant, "if it turned out that some sympathizer with the Central Powers had gone daffy on the subject of hitting at the Allies, and struck on the scheme of trying to blow up a factory that was understood to be furnishing munitions for Russia and Great Britain. 'Course he didn't suspect that the stuff was really mostly for Uncle Sam, because few people are in the secret. He must be some aviator, mebbe a crackerjack flier who has been eating his heart out because he couldn't get over on the other side to help his country in the war. How's that, Rob, for a guess?"

Rob immediately patted Tubby encouragingly on the back.

"Great stuff, Tubby," he told the pleased scout. "You've hit on the same explanation that seemed to strike Mr. Simpson as the most plausible; and since I didn't say a word about it to any one your guess deserves all the more credit. To tell you the honest truth I think the very same myself, and hope events will prove it that way. A single crazy aviator could be secured, and that would end the danger; whereas if there was a regularly organized conspiracy, other desperate fliers might be ready to take up the game, and in the end hit their mark."

"Whew! excuse me from wanting to be right here if a bomb did strike one of the buildings where big shells are being loaded," grunted Tubby, with an intake of breath that spoke even louder than words.

Presently Rob told them that even conversing in whispers should be dropped.

"We will have plenty of time to talk things over to-morrow, boys," was the way he put it. "As there are several more hours of darkness,

perhaps we had better arrange it so that a part of the force can get a few winks of sleep."

Rob himself did not mean to relax his vigilance for a single minute, but since it did not seem necessary that the entire six should stand guard when half that number would do as well, and he felt certain that Tubby was dying for sleep, he made this suggestion in hopes of relieving the strain as far as possible.

Tubby demurred a little, but was soon convinced that he could be spared. Sim, too, and Mr. Beare were induced to lie down in a sheltered spot, wrapping their coats about them the best they could. Fortunately the night was not bitter cold, though the mercury was hovering about the freezing point, and gloves had been needed to keep their fingers warm. All of the scouts wore sweaters under their khaki coats, a habit with them when engaged on duty during fall or winter.

Gradually the work in the foundry and machine shops took up its familiar drone, as the toilers of the night returned to their lathes, benches, and the sand pattern moulds where the

molten metal poured in a hissing stream, to come out later in various shapes.

An hour, two, three of them crept slowly on, and there was no alarm to once more cause a spasm of fear to clutch at the hearts of the hundreds employed in the night shift. The aviator evidently did not mean to return again on that night to make another effort at crippling the industry at the munition plant.

So dawn found them, and those scouts who were still on duty, as well as the wide-awake Josh, greeted the light in the east as a harbinger of hope.

CHAPTER XXVI.

ON THE ROAD TO PREPAREDNESS.

Only for one thing Rob would certainly have started for Hampton immediately after breakfast that morning; but he remembered what Mr. Simpson had said, and concluded to stay a while.

"We can hang around here and see a whole lot of things of interest," he explained to the others, after Josh and Mr. Beare had left to go to the house of the latter, so that Susie might be told of the joyful reconciliation that had taken place. "The manager of the munition plant has promised to show us through the entire works, and such a golden opportunity may never come our way again."

"Well," remarked Andy, "he ought to be mighty grateful to the scouts, seems to me, if Mr. Simpson has told him all we had a hand in doing last night. I just reckon we saved some of those fine new buildings from being wrecked by that desperate gang. I wonder, now, if Mr. Simpson

will manage to find out who supplied the money to that Wicklow crowd?"

"That's a hard thing to say," Rob explained. "If any foreign Government has agents, which we believe to be the case, and they try such treacherous business as that, they know enough to hide the trail so that even such a clever man as Mr. Simpson can never pick it up. You heard Wicklow tell him *his* future was secured, no matter if he had to go to prison for years. That means he is employed by some nation that wants to keep the Allies from getting supplies of arms."

"It's getting to be a ticklish affair all around, seems to me," observed Andy. "Your Uncle Sam may find himself at war some of these fine mornings when he wakes up."

"I figure that we could stay here until the four o'clock train this afternoon. That will take us to New York in time to make connection for home," the scout leader went on to say. "I'd like ever so much to learn just who that aviator can be, and what his real object was in dropping that bomb."

As all of the others were of the same mind they raised no objections to stopping at the roadside inn until the middle of the afternoon. Tubby's face fairly glowed, and it did not take much discernment to guess what was uppermost in the mind of the fat scout. Such a programme called for another dinner at the tavern; and Tubby had fallen in love with that as yet unseen man cook, whose acquaintance he meant to make before noon came around.

It was almost ten o'clock when a car came speeding along and drew up at the inn.

"Rob, here's Mr. Simpson wanting you!" called Andy, rushing in great excitement upstairs to their rooms, where it chanced the scout leader was jotting something down in his little diary.

"Oh!" exclaimed Tubby who was also on hand, "I wonder if he's come to tell us that he's got a clue to the identity of that crazy aviator. Hey! wait up for me, won't you, fellows? Don't leave me out of the deal, if you please, Rob!"

When Rob reached the car in which the Government agent sat behind a discreet chauffeur he saw that Mr. Simpson was smiling pleasantly.

"Can you boys jump in and come with me for a little spin?" he asked.

"Certainly, sir," replied Rob, promptly. "Sim and Tubby are coming as fast as they can. Merritt and Andy are already on deck."

"I've picked up some information connected with that mysterious aviator, Rob," the officer declared. "It seems that he is, as I half suspected, somewhat daffy on the subject of the war, having lost a number of relatives in the fierce fighting that is going on. He is a German reservist himself, though he cannot get across to join his regiment. If he were in his right mind I do not expect the man would dream of following any such desperate tactics as blowing up a building believed to be supplying the enemies of his country with munitions. But wait and see. Hop in, boys, and we'll be off."

Presently they were speeding over the road at a lively clip. Some twenty miles were thus passed. Then at a certain place they came upon a second car that contained half a dozen quiet-looking and determined men, whom the boys understood to be some of the Secret Service officers

sent on from Washington headquarters to back up Mr. Simpson in his work.

"The man in question has a place, I have been told," Mr. Simpson explained to Rob and his chums as they sped on, "somewhere in this region. We will come to a village soon, and at the post office I expect to meet the man who sent this information to me by wire. He will act as our guide when we surround the lonely hut in the woods beside the open field where this man has erected a hangar to keep his aeroplane in. I rather think the mystery of that bomb-dropping episode is already in a fair way of being cleared up."

Arriving at a rather forlorn-looking village, the name of which it is unnecessary to mention here, they found the postmaster ready to lead them to the habitation of the recluse who had built an aeroplane, and was known to be taking night flights frequently, something seldom attempted among ordinary aviators.

When they had presently left their cars and trailed through a patch of woods the word was passed around that they were close to the iso-

lated cabin where the strange-acting man lived. They soon saw his rude hangar in the open field, and from the fact that it was closed Mr. Simpson believed the machine to be stored inside.

Approaching the cabin cautiously, after the manner of so many red Indians, the little party soon had it completely surrounded. There was no sound heard at first, and then Rob, who had crept up close, caught the heavy breathing of a sleeper. From this fact they guessed that the occupant, having been up most of the preceding night, was taking a nap to refresh his weary frame.

Entrance was soon effected, though the door they found to be locked. One man who seemed an adept at this sort of work managed to open a small window, and crawl noiselessly inside, after which he removed the bar placed across the door, and some of the others were enabled to enter.

As the man lying on a cot sat up, rubbing his eyes in surprise, he was pounced on before he could secure a weapon. He fought savagely, and from his fierce cries it was easy to under-

stand that his mind could not be right. Indeed, his arrest seemed to finish the shifting of his faculties that had been taking place for some time, and he commenced raving like a maniac.

A hasty search gave Mr. Simpson all the information he wanted. They found quite a number of rudely-made bombs in the cabin; and upon examining the monoplane that they discovered in the hangar several more of the same type.

There could not be the least doubt but that the mentally unbalanced German reservist had been responsible for that attempt to destroy the munition factory. With his arrest the plans of the Washington Government for preparedness were spared a disastrous halt; indeed from that hour onward they could be said to be well on the road to success.

As there was now no further reason to delay their start for home, the five members of the Eagle Patrol determined to leave the roadside tavern immediately after dinner had been dispatched. Mr. Simpson placed a car at their service to take them to Trenton, if they felt like enjoying that long ride over fairly good roads.

Josh Whittlesby had been given Rob's address, and they hoped before long to hear from the honest fellow concerning the progress of his new career in his position at the plant. They had also impressed it upon him that at some time in the coming summer he must fetch that pretty little wife of his up to Hampton, to pay them a visit, for all of them from Rob down to Tubby felt a decided interest in the future happiness of the young pair.

The story concerning the insane effort of the lone aviator to wreck the big munition plant was pretty well hushed up, and this may really be the first that many people have heard of the incident. It was different with regard to the conspiracy of which Michael Wicklow seemed to be the head, for he had to be placed on trial and convicted.

Just as he had boasted, however, all the efforts of the Secret Service men failed to discover who the rest of his confederates had been, nor were they able to fully learn where the money came from by which the bold scheme was backed up, although suspicion pointed to certain

men having connections with the enemies of the Allies.

Perhaps a hint was dropped to the effect that this particular plant was engaged on special rush work for Uncle Sam, and that the United States Government would take strong action if any further attempt were made to create a strike while the plant was working on the important order that took precedence over all others. At any rate, up to the time of writing, there has never been another occasion when the guards at the big and bustling plant have been called on to make a single arrest. When Uncle Sam wakes up in earnest and gets good and angry it seems that even representatives of powerful foreign powers can read the hand-writing on the wall, and know it is time to call a halt to secret operations.

In due time Rob and his chums reached home. They kept their secret among themselves for weeks, until finally a letter was received from Mr. Simpson absolving them from their promise. He also sent the fragment of bomb to Rob as he had agreed, and wrote that Wicklow was

serving a sentence of ten years in the penitentiary for his part in the attempted destruction of the plant in New Jersey.

Josh Whittlesby had also been heard from and reported himself as the happiest chap living. He had a permanent position at last, and at big pay; he also mentioned that he believed he was making good, for the manager of the munition plant had assured him that he looked upon him as a fixture. Josh blessed the lucky day when his cries for help had been heard by Rob and Tubby. Only for that fortunate meeting he shuddered to think what his dismal future might have been.

Although the boys of the Eagle Patrol had once more started to school as though nothing out of the usual run had happened to them, the story of their late exploits managed to leak out, possibly through Tubby, who could never keep a secret, especially when it concerned the glory of his chum, Rob Blake. Consequently they were besieged by their comrades of Hampton Troop to tell all the facts, and in the end Rob had to grant their request.

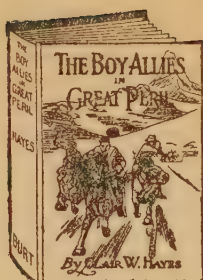
It may be taken for granted that Rob and the other scouts, whom we have grown to know so well, will meet with still further adventures, since Fortune seems to pick out certain fellows on whom to shower her favors. In that event we can faithfully promise that a new book, "The Boy Scouts Badge of Courage," will follow this story shortly, and we only hope that the interested reader may look forward to its coming with as much eagerness as the writer will take in providing the volume.

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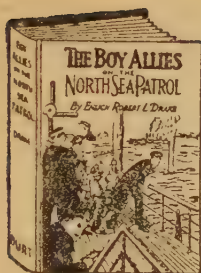
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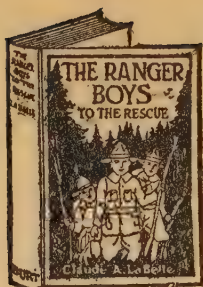
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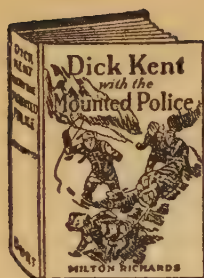
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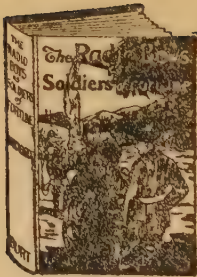
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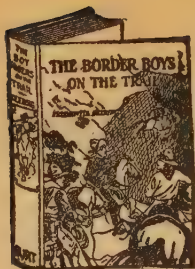
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